

# **7** Communication applications for openness and improved public policies and services

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This chapter analyses the contribution of public communication to improved policies and services as well as to the fundamental open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation. It focuses on campaigns, crisis and internal communication, as well as media relations. It makes the case for communications as a lever of government and a key contributor to good governance and democracy. It provides examples of how it can be used to advance countries' strategic objectives with a focus on the responses used during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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## Introduction

The previous chapters of this Report analyse the governance arrangements and institutional requirements that can enable a more strategic public communication. They also examine the role of audience and behavioural insights, as well as evaluations, to fulfil this potential, before focusing on the particular context communicators are operating in and how they can respond to the threats of mis- and disinformation. This last chapter provides examples of how to maximise the ability of communications to improve policies and services, strengthen governance, and ultimately reinforce democracy.

As discussed throughout the Report, the potential remains for the public communication function to be used more effectively as a tool for policy making and better governance. For example, in their response to the OECD survey, only 16% of CoGs prioritised “better understanding and analysing public opinion”, and only 8% prioritised “promoting stakeholder participation” as the objectives of their communication initiatives (see Chapter 2, Figure 2.1). Indeed, policy makers “frequently undervalue the role of communication in policy delivery” (WPP Government & Public Sector Practice, 2016<sup>[1]</sup>), and although communication can be used throughout the policy cycle, it mainly takes the form of campaigns for policy announcements and awareness-raising purposes (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[2]</sup>).

This chapter therefore provides examples of how to go beyond this classic use of communications. It explores how governments apply selected communication competencies that were covered in the OECD survey to support policies and services. This includes:

- targeting campaigns to support the implementation of policies and the take-up of services
- strengthening a constructive relationship with the media
- seizing the potential of internal communication for a more effective public sector
- communicating efficiently and inclusively during crises.

Each of these sections also includes an analysis and examples of the use of communication to promote the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation.

## The use of campaigns to support the implementation of policies and services

Public communication campaigns are one of the most common means to support the implementation of policies and the delivery of services (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[2]</sup>). They help raise awareness of specific government reforms and support policy makers in pursuing targeted goals over defined timeframes. Beyond sharing information, they can also serve to help change public behaviour—as highlighted through their use during the COVID-19 pandemic—and enhance engagement in policy-making processes (Macnamara, 2017<sup>[2]</sup>).

The responses to the OECD survey highlighted common trends, opportunities and challenges with regards to implementing campaigns as an instrument of policy making. Notably, these activities emerged as one of the most established competencies across all countries and one that is often closely linked with policy goals. The following sections also highlight how campaigns have been used to amplify citizen participation, such as in the context of deliberative processes, and to foster a culture of integrity throughout society.

### ***A widely used yet challenging practice***

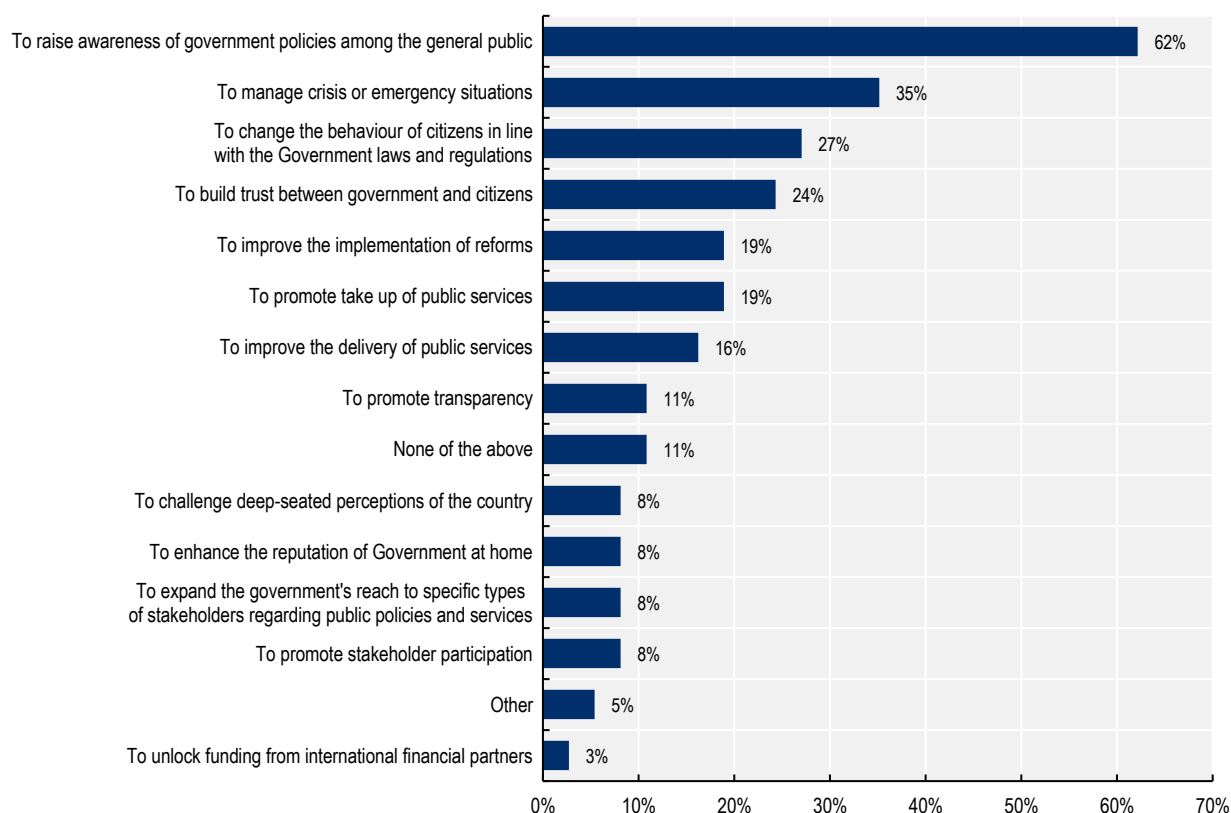
Campaigns are the most commonly used tool to communicate about governmental policies. Surveyed countries have also used them to support greater use of services and increased policy compliance, change citizens’ behaviour, and to a lesser extent, promote wider socio-economic policy goals.

Indeed, the majority of CoGs surveyed (35 out of 37; 95%)<sup>1</sup> and MHs (22 out of 24; 92%) run campaigns. This is consistent with the number of CoGs with specific resources for campaigns, with 35 out of 37 CoGs (95%) mentioning they have dedicated capacities and 18 of these 35 having specialised structures for this purpose comprising 1 to 10 staff. Three CoGs declared having a structure that deals with campaigns but no dedicated staff and 5 did not provide a number, while 9 comprised between 11 and over 100 individuals. The 35 CoGs that said they used campaigns ran close to 700 campaigns in 2019, with 7 CoGs not conducting any during that specific year. While the number of campaigns implemented by countries varied greatly, the highest volumes were seen in countries where the CoG had a clear mandate for implementing and/or co-ordinating campaigns, and dedicated structures that were staffed and resourced (see Chapter 2).

While this is a nearly ubiquitous competency across countries surveyed, the planning and implementation of communication campaigns was selected as one of the three most challenging competencies by 26% of CoGs<sup>2</sup> and 33% of MHs.<sup>3</sup> For these institutions, the main reasons cited include co-ordination as well as human and financial resources.

The widespread use of campaigns is also reflected in the diverse reasons for their use. Examples shared through the OECD survey illustrate that campaigns are used to raise awareness of government policies (62%) and change the behaviour of citizens in line with government laws and regulations (27%) (Figure 7.1). Promoting transparency and stakeholder participation are not as highly prioritised.

**Figure 7.1. The most important objectives of recent campaigns run by CoGs**



Note: n CoG = 37. Austria and Sweden responded this question did not apply in their context; n MH = 24. Survey respondents were asked to select up to three options.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understand Public Communication".

Well-designed and implemented campaigns prove to be cost-effective and can prove the value of communications to senior leadership and to society as a whole. Some of the experiences shared through the OECD surveys, including examples developed below, have resulted in measurable increases in compliance with governments' measures, uptake of public services and, even in economic growth.

Using audience insights and behavioural sciences to tailor campaigns has proven key in this effort (see Chapter 3). For example, in 2018, a British government campaign to promote the timely filing of tax returns led to an all-time record of 94% compliance with the deadline (Box 7.1).

### **Box 7.1. The 2018 tax return campaign in the United Kingdom**

In 2018, the UK government redesigned its annual tax return campaign in an effort to boost tax intake and improve its record-breaking 2017 result of 93% compliance with the deadline. To do so, it drew on existing insights from previous campaigns and ongoing behavioural insights trials to identify trends and potential gaps for improvement.

Instead of leveraging positive insights to influence behaviour, the government took the innovative approach of using ducks to personify the negative feeling of guilt that citizens could feel when filing their tax return. To create engagement, endearing messages such as “don't let the thought of your tax return peck away at you” were spread across multiple low-cost channels, including the press and social media. The campaign was also advertised on the radio, roadside posters, and digital displays. The behavioural insights team also targeted customers likely to miss the deadline based on previous evidence and sent them a series of reminders via SMS, mail and email, resulting in a significant decrease in late returns.

This initiative led to a record 94% of customers filing by the deadline in 2018, boosting tax intake in the United Kingdom by GBP 1.5 billion. The campaign also contributed to an increase in media coverage, leading to 98% positive press coverage.

Source: GCS, Campaign Highlights 2018/19.

Communication campaigns in the health sector, including during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have also shown their potential and limits to support behavioural change, compliance with related policies and guidance, and uptake of government services. For example, monitoring the impact of immunisation campaigns in Australia has allowed the government to measure trends in attitudes towards vaccination and the adoption and implementation of related actions (Box 7.2). In the COVID-19 context, evaluations of campaigns led by the Irish Ministry of Health for example showed that they helped foster adherence to government measures to ensure the safety and health of individuals. Many governments have however had to implement complementary measures to communication campaigns (such as regulations), as the pandemic has underlined the limitations and downsides of some campaigns in ensuring large segments of the population comply with the needed measures. From a service uptake perspective, communication initiatives by health departments in Ireland and Switzerland to raise awareness of existing programmes to help people quit tobacco use have led to a substantial increase in the use of such services (Box 7.3).

### Box 7.2. Australia's childhood immunisation campaign and the measure of citizens' attitudes and behaviours

In 2017, the Australian government launched its Childhood Immunisation Education Campaign “Get the Facts about Immunisation”, to boost confidence in vaccination and the National Immunisation Program. The campaign targeted parents of children aged 0 to 5, health professionals and pregnant women with the aim of increasing their intention of participating in childhood vaccination by providing them with evidence-based information and data to guide their decision.

Get the facts on childhood immunisation – help protect your community



Phase 3 of the campaign was initiated in 2019, drawing on online benchmark and tracking surveys conducted among key audiences. The goal was to extensively evaluate the campaign's effect based on three main principles: reach, response and impact.

Building on the above, the government identified trends in attitudes towards vaccination and gaps for improvement to enhance the effectiveness of the campaign. The scope for more targeted messaging included a focus on the benefits of vaccinations, tailored information to pregnant women, and geo-targeting recipients.

Source: Australian Department of Health, Get the Facts Campaign Evaluation Report, September 2019.

### Box 7.3. Using campaigns to improve the uptake of support programmes to quit smoking in Ireland and Switzerland

Ireland's 'QUIT' campaign and Switzerland's "Smoke Free" one were launched to help citizens quit smoking and reduce overall tobacco consumption in their respective societies. They rely either on online programmes or applications to raise awareness, stimulate a dialogue and guide citizens towards a smoke-free life.

The Swiss government launched the "Smoke Free Buddy" app, developed based on science by specialists in smoking addiction, to provide interactive support and services for people who want to quit smoking. The Health Service Executive in Ireland developed a Quit Plan that individuals can sign up for, providing phone, email and text support, a personalised website to track progress, and one-to-one support to stop smoking from trained advisors.

These campaigns helped boost the delivery and uptake of tobacco cessation services. In Ireland, there were almost 291 000 visits to quit.ie in 2020 and 7 755 quit plans were activated. 45.5% of those who entered into the intensive cessation support programme in 2020 had quit at 4 weeks. Moreover, the campaign proved to be effective and prompted 600 000 quit attempts since 2011. In Ireland, *Tobacco Free Ireland*, the national tobacco control policy, outlines an ambitious target of having less than 5% of the population smoking by 2025. Similarly, following a comprehensive evaluation, the first wave of the Swiss Smoke Free campaign was shown to have amplified consultations on the health department's smoke-free line by two to three times. Moreover, a third of the smokers surveyed who had decided to quit smoking managed to do so during the course of the campaign, resulting in an overall reduction in smoking prevalence of 1.17% within the target group aged 20 to 78.

Source: <https://www2.hse.ie/quit-smoking/>; [https://www.bag.admin.ch/bag/de/home/strategie-und-politik/kampagnen/tabakpraeventionskampagne.html#312\\_1574771951763\\_content\\_bag\\_de\\_home\\_strategie-und-politik\\_kampagnen\\_tabakpraeventionskampagne\\_icr\\_content\\_par\\_tabs](https://www.bag.admin.ch/bag/de/home/strategie-und-politik/kampagnen/tabakpraeventionskampagne.html#312_1574771951763_content_bag_de_home_strategie-und-politik_kampagnen_tabakpraeventionskampagne_icr_content_par_tabs); and <https://www2.hse.ie/quit-smoking/>; <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/tobaccocontrol/information-for-media-and-journalists/>; Health Service Executive (HSE), Tobacco Free Ireland Programme End of Year Report 2020, <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/tobaccocontrol/hse-tfi-2018-2021-plan/tfip-end-of-year-report-2020.pdf>.

When designed and implemented in a strategic way, campaigns have the potential to contribute to broader socio-economic goals. In doing so, their application additionally ensures their use is cost-effective and their value-add is recognised across the whole of government and society (Box 7.4).

#### **Box 7.4. Using public communication campaigns for growth: “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal”**

In 2017, in an effort to promote the image of Belgium, the federal government launched a multi-year campaign entitled “Belgium. Uniquely phenomenal”, with 99 good reasons to visit and invest in Belgium, marketed in a humorous and modest way to reflect the country’s appeal.

The campaign was launched with extensive visually striking posters displayed all over Belgium. A viral and international campaign complemented these efforts with a website, targeted video content on social media, and an extensive public relations, influence and partnership programme targeting foreign journalists and influencers.

Over time, the consistent use of the visual identity and messages has created a familiar brand, achieving the intended impact on targeted audiences and markets. The campaign has contributed to supporting Belgium authorities, private actors and companies to export and expand into new markets abroad. It has also supported tourism, universities and more by encouraging people to visit and discover the opportunities the country has to offer. It led to more than 333 influencer posts and more than 420 articles in the Belgian and international press. Uniquely Phenomenal has thus united efforts of actors from the public and private sectors to generate activity, jobs, growth and attract new opportunities for a variety of actors in the society.

Source: <https://www.uniquelyphenomenal.be/>; <https://kanselarij.belgium.be/en/major-project/belgium-uniquely-phenomenal>; <https://uniquely-phenomenal-belgium-partner-room.prezly.com/partners-room-107775>

#### ***An opportunity to promote citizen participation***

While campaigns are most often used to share information, governments can also develop them to increase opportunities for citizen participation in public life. Indeed, only 8% of CoGs indicated in their response to the OECD survey that their campaigns aim to promote stakeholder participation (Figure 7.1). As mentioned in the joint OECD-Open Government Partnership (OGP) Guide on communicating Open Government (OECD, 2019<sup>[3]</sup>), such tools can highlight existing opportunities for individuals to contribute to laws for example, or widen the government’s interactions with the public (Box 7.5) and target specific groups, including traditionally underrepresented ones. They can also help engage the public with the development of OGP action plans (Box 7.6). Furthermore, campaigns can raise awareness on the processes and objectives of participation opportunities, their envisioned outcomes and how inputs provided will be taken into account (OECD, 2018<sup>[4]</sup>), which can further support citizens’ involvement in similar exercises in the future.

### **Box 7.5. National Consultations and communication in OECD countries**

#### **Mexico's General Consultation of the National Strategy for the 2030 Agenda**

The Mexican government launched a public consultation in 2018 with the aim of engaging with and gathering feedback from citizens to develop the National Strategy for the 2030 Agenda. Citizens were asked to comment on a draft proposal prepared by the Federal Government with concrete objectives, actions, institutional responsibilities and indicators to achieve results for the SDGs.

To this end, the Government launched an online awareness-raising campaign to share information on the SDG agenda, the country's progress to date, and available opportunities to participate in this exercise. The public consultation allowed citizens to express their views and opinions via several channels, including forums, social media (i.e. linked in, facebook, twitter), dialogue tables and a dedicated electronic portal. Participants ranging from the private sector, civil society and academic institutions took part in the process.

#### **Turkey's "I have an Idea for my Country" national consultation**

This project, initiated by the Directorate of Communications of the Republic of Turkey, enables citizens to share and assess creative ideas that they believe will benefit the country. The project involved 16 ministries, eight directorates and four offices operating under the Presidency. A team formed within the Directorate conducted a preliminary assessment of the ideas received.

They were then submitted to relevant institutions for their assessment. Between February 7, 2019, when the project was announced, and December 31, 2019, a total of 45.106 ideas were submitted online. 31.514 of these ideas have been approved and forwarded to relevant institutions.

Source: <https://latinno.net/en/case/13262/>; Contributions from the Directorate of Communications within the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey.

### **Box 7.6. Stakeholder participation in the Government of Canada's 5th National Action Plan on Open Government**

As a member of the OGP, the Government of Canada provided citizens with the opportunity to actively participate in the development of the Government of Canada's 5th National Action Plan on Open Government. On their "Let's Talk Open Government" website, anyone could provide feedback and comments on the Plan's commitments. Several discussions took place on the platform including some related to climate change, corporate and financial transparency as well as combatting disinformation. A summary of the topic at hand was provided, with questions for citizens to reflect upon to stimulate online debate. Furthermore, the website provided information on the timeline for the Plan's publication, a Frequently Asked Question section, and the possibility to provide feedback privately.

In addition to discussions that took place on the online platform, the Government of Canada also held a series of live consultation sessions through a digital platform over a five-week period in November and December 2020.

Source: <https://letstalkopengov.ca/>.



Using campaigns to inform citizens about the opportunities and outcomes of deliberative processes can also yield significant results (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>). Campaigns have indeed helped amplify public learning going beyond the participants of the process, as in the case of the Irish Citizens' Assembly (see Box 7.9).

### ***A tool to foster a culture of integrity***

The use of campaigns to promote integrity is a key example of an application of public communication in support of good governance (OECD, 2017<sup>[6]</sup>). Integrity is defined as the “consistent alignment of, and adherence to, shared ethical values, principles and norms for upholding and prioritising the public interest over private interests in public-sector behaviour and decision-making” (OECD, 2017<sup>[6]</sup>). This means that governments and public officials understand, adopt and behave according to adequate standards at all times, put the public interest ahead of personal and private interests, and carry out public duties in a way that allows for and can endure public scrutiny while not raising suspicions, concerns or breaches (OECD, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>).

In this context, campaigns can help foster shared values and expectations and increase individual buy-in and action for and with integrity. They help underline corruption risks in specific sectors, raise awareness of segments of the population and increase their understanding of public integrity issues within and beyond public institutions (Box 7.14). For example, campaigns help build citizens' and public officials' knowledge of where and how to find and use oversight and audit reports and when, where and how to blow the whistle if they are confronted with wrongdoings.

The use of public communication in promoting a culture of integrity is illustrated by the example from Latvia (Box 7.7) and by a multi-faceted campaign developed by the Council for the Prevention of Corruption in Portugal. Among other activities, the “Images against Corruption” (*Imagens contra a Corrupção*) campaign included a series of contests for schools where students discussed issues related to fraud, corruption and bribery and produced sculptures, drawings, plays and songs showing lessons learned, with awards for the best ones (OECD, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>).

#### **Box 7.7. Whole-of-society communication efforts to foster integrity in Latvia**

In 2019, the Latvian government carried out a campaign to promote a new whistleblower law called “See.Hear.Talk.”. It included two large media events and eight discussions with different target audiences (entrepreneurs, young adults, civil servants, etc.).

In an effort to support whole-of-society engagement, the campaign was also covered on television, radio, press, social media and outdoor advertisements. Moreover, a microsite was developed to explain the impact of the new law as well as the online whistleblower forms available to the public.

The campaign received more than 180 pieces of coverage on local and national news outlets. A specific strategy was also used to communicate with young adults in an approachable way through YouTube notably.

Source: [www.trauksmescelejs.lv](http://www.trauksmescelejs.lv).

Governmental awareness campaigns can also be designed and implemented jointly with third parties. Such campaigns can take various forms and use diverse channels, such as radio, television, print and social media (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc.), or a combination, depending on the objectives and target audiences, as illustrated by the examples of blogs and YouTube campaign for integrity in Greece (Box 7.8).

### Box 7.8. Integrity campaigns targeting youth in Greece

As part of an OECD project with Greece to increase integrity and reduce corruption in the country, the government developed the “be the change you want to see” campaign on YouTube in 2018. The campaign called on YouTubers, who are among the most influential figures among young people, to share their personal experiences of corruption.

The aim was to create authentic content that young people could easily relate to and that allowed them to engage with content creators, seen as ordinary people with common concerns and interests. Rather than focusing on the scale and scope of corruption, the goal was to engage young people in a conversation and emphasise that youth have the power and responsibility to change culture for the better.

The reaction to the vlogs was positive and the campaign sparked great interest in this topic among young Greeks, reaching 78% of 13- to 34-year-olds. The videos received 888 240 visits and more than 62 000 reactions.

Source: <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/ethics/youth-anti-corruption-campaign.htm>.

## Strengthening a constructive relationship with the media

Impactful public communications require a robust and well-functioning media and information ecosystem to ensure they contribute fully to transparent and effective policies, service delivery and democratic engagement. While online and social media platforms have enabled one-to-one communication and facilitated easier access to broad segments of society, regular media engagement helps ensure that relevant and trustworthy information is widely shared and disseminated. Reporters Without Borders (RSF) data highlights the correlation between a government’s robust media engagement frameworks and practices and a pluralistic, sound media environment as well as the importance of these conditions in ensuring wide audiences are reached and well-informed. Countries with enabling legal environments and constructive relationships between the media and government rank higher on the organisation’s world press freedom index.<sup>4</sup>

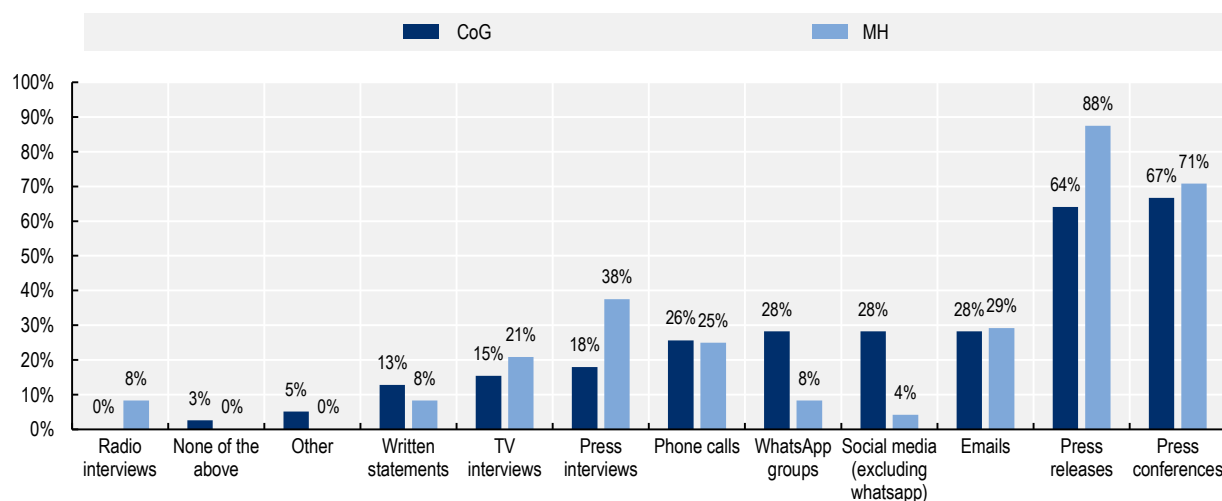
This section explores how public communicators can engage strategically with the media to promote transparency and participation.<sup>5</sup> All OECD member and partner countries surveyed engage with the media through their centre of government (CoG), through ministries or both. This takes a wide range of forms, including press releases, conferences, social media interactions, as well as television and radio interviews. The objectives pursued tend to vary, and data collected through the OECD survey indicated there is still scope to optimise the utility of these relationships, in particular as they relate to promoting active transparency, which is understood as the obligation of public institutions to disseminate information without citizens having to request it, and increasing participation. Additionally, and through increased access to and publication of information by media, stakeholders are more exposed to evidence about priorities, policies and decisions that can help them scrutinise and hold governments to account.

Press releases and press conferences were among the three most used channels to communicate with journalists for respectively 64% and 67% of CoGs, and 88% and 71% of MHs (Figure 7.2), the vast majority of which are done on a weekly or daily basis. For example, 59% of CoGs and 63% of MHs issued daily press releases in 2019. Similarly, regular press conferences were organised, creating opportunities for direct questions and discussions between public officials and journalists. In 2019, 59% of CoGs and 29% of MHs offered them on a weekly basis, and 28% of CoGs and 25% of MHs on an ad hoc one.

In data collected across OECD member and partner countries, press conferences were described as open to all journalists by 70% of the 37 CoGs responding to this question and 83% of MHs. Respondents stated that journalists' questions were allowed, with 97% of the 37 CoGs and 92% out of the 24 MHs selecting that there were no restrictions (e.g. pre-selected topics to be covered, submission of questions prior to the press conference) or prior approval of questions required.

Furthermore, social media interactions and WhatsApp groups were used by public communicators to engage with journalists in 28% of CoGs, while only one MH selected social media and 2 opted for WhatsApp groups (Figure 7.2). The potential to open discussions through these forums on an individual level can be capitalised on further to strengthen two-way communication processes, as detailed in Chapter 5.

**Figure 7.2. The most commonly used channels by CoGs and MHs to communicate with journalists**

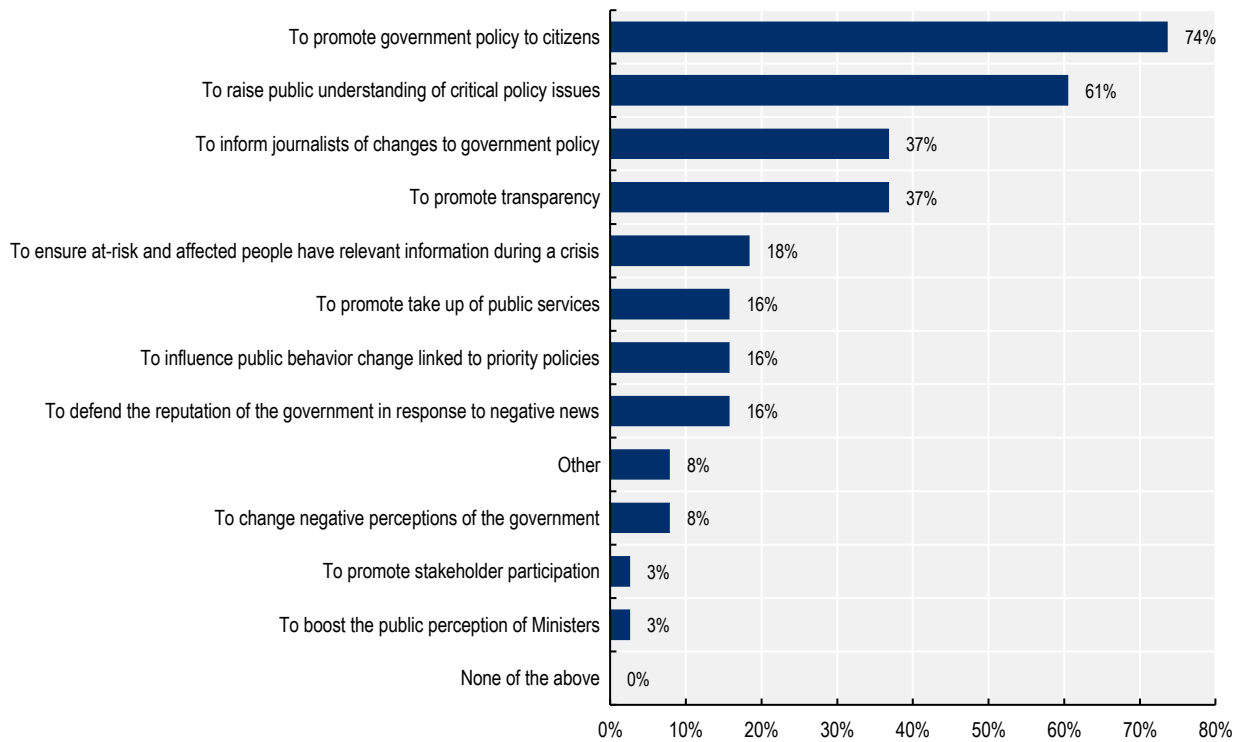


Note: n CoG = 39 ; n MH = 24. Survey respondents were asked to select up to three options.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

In both CoGs and MHs, promoting transparency was selected as the third main priority for media engagement in surveyed countries. Notably, 37% of CoGs and 58% of MHs selected it as one of their three primary objectives pursued through media relations. In CoGs, this follows the objectives of promoting government policies (74%) and raising public understanding of critical policy issues (61%) and is tied with informing journalists of changes to government policy (37%) (Figure 7.3). Promoting stakeholder participation was selected by one CoG as a priority, and none of the MHs indicated it was an area of focus.

By helping to make information more widely available, accessible and relevant through media relations, public communicators serve an important role in upholding transparency in public life. They do so by delivering timely, accurate and appropriate messages directly to target audiences and removing the requirement for citizens to search public databases or portals for information.

**Figure 7.3. Most important objectives for the CoG's engagement with the media**

Note: n CoG = 38. Respondents were asked to select up to three options. Austria did not provide data for this question.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

Governments could consider making use of their media relations to further other key principles beyond transparency, such as stakeholder participation for example. Indeed, by using appropriate media channels and targeted messages, communicators can help ensure they go beyond the function's focus on information provision. Practices shared by surveyed countries have highlighted that some media-handling plans can specifically support stakeholder engagement opportunities. Media relations play a crucial role in promoting public learning with regards to the results of deliberative processes and other innovative forms of citizen participation for example (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>), as per the case of the Irish Citizens' Assembly (Box 7.9).

### **Box 7.9. Communicating about the Irish Citizens' Assembly and involving the media in promoting deliberative processes**

An example of how public communication expands public learning beyond the participants of the process is the Irish Citizens' Assembly of 2016-2018. The latter was composed of 99 randomly selected citizens, who were tasked with providing recommendations for the constitutional amendment regarding the right to abortion. This complex topic had been the subject of political debate for years. Participants had an opportunity to learn from experts, listen to stakeholders, and deliberate. In the Assembly's recommendation to the special cross-party parliamentary committee that was set up to consider its conclusions, they advised changing the eighth amendment of the constitution, which at the time banned abortions, and suggested that the government hold a referendum on the matter, which is required in Ireland for constitutional changes (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>).

The initiative was communicated to the public throughout the whole process. Specific outreach activities included streaming discussions online and interviews with participants in the press, radio and television. Radio interviews allowed participants to discuss their experiences and the public to hear from citizens like them, which helped to build support for the citizen-driven nature of the process.

Public communicators and organisers of the process engaged with journalists to echo and amplify participants' discussions. Media coverage was especially helpful in presenting the nuances of this national debate.

Source: (OECD, 2020<sup>[5]</sup>; Suiter, 2018<sup>[8]</sup>; Matasick, 2020<sup>[9]</sup>).

## **Seizing the potential of internal communication to create a more effective public sector**

A key finding from the OECD survey, echoed by the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication, emphasised the potential for internal communication to be used more strategically. Understood as the communication within and across public sector organisations, it enables senior officials to inform and engage employees in a way that motivates staff to maximise their performance and enable them to deliver on strategic outcomes.<sup>6</sup> According to the OECD Recommendation on Public Service Leadership and Capability (2019<sup>[10]</sup>), such communication is central to the design and implementation of public services as it ensures optimal flows of data and information and supports the exchange of good practices while also contributing to breaking siloes between different parts of the administration. It can also foster transparent decision making and strengthen its legitimacy while also opening channels for feedback and engagement.

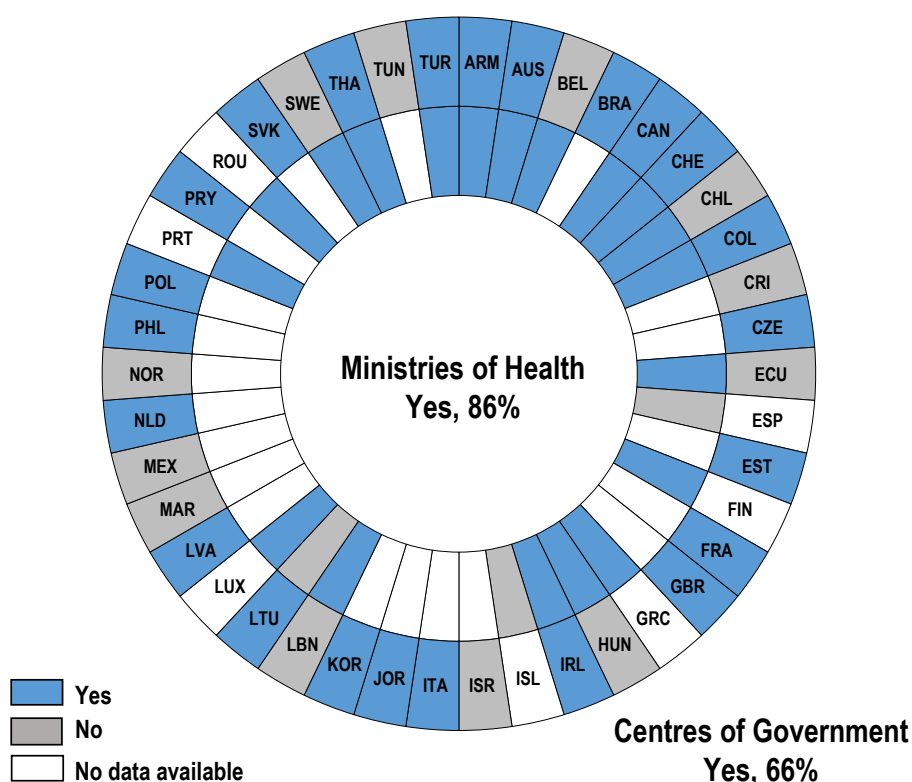
The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted another central role for internal communications: that of engaging with public officials who were required to work remotely at short notice. Similarly to most countries, over 50% of the Irish public sector workforce, for example, was working from home in 2020 (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, 2020<sup>[11]</sup>). Communicators therefore had a critical role to play in ensuring the continuation of operations, while also sharing information within the public service in more flexible, rapid and reliable ways.

This section explores the contribution of internal communication to a more effective public sector. It analyses the existing structures, protocols and mechanisms used to communicate key information across government, drawing on good practices from OECD member countries and beyond.

### The state of play of internal communication in CoGs and MHs

To share information effectively across departments, establish an organisational identity and ensure communication supports strategic objectives, governments need a dedicated unit that continuously informs and engages with staff. This was acknowledged in most countries surveyed, where 23 out of 35 CoGs (66%) and 19 out of 22 MHs (86%) have dedicated structures, teams or individuals in charge of managing internal communication within and beyond the institution (Figure 7.4). In a few countries, such as Latvia, these responsibilities were included within the human resource department. In other cases, as in some federal countries, whole-of-government internal communication did not lie within the CoG but was rather mainstreamed across different ministries. Irrespective of its location, establishing a structure in this regard is particularly important given that communication programmes at times require the co-ordination of different actors and policy agendas.

Figure 7.4. Availability of a unit/team/individual for internal communication in CoGs and MHs



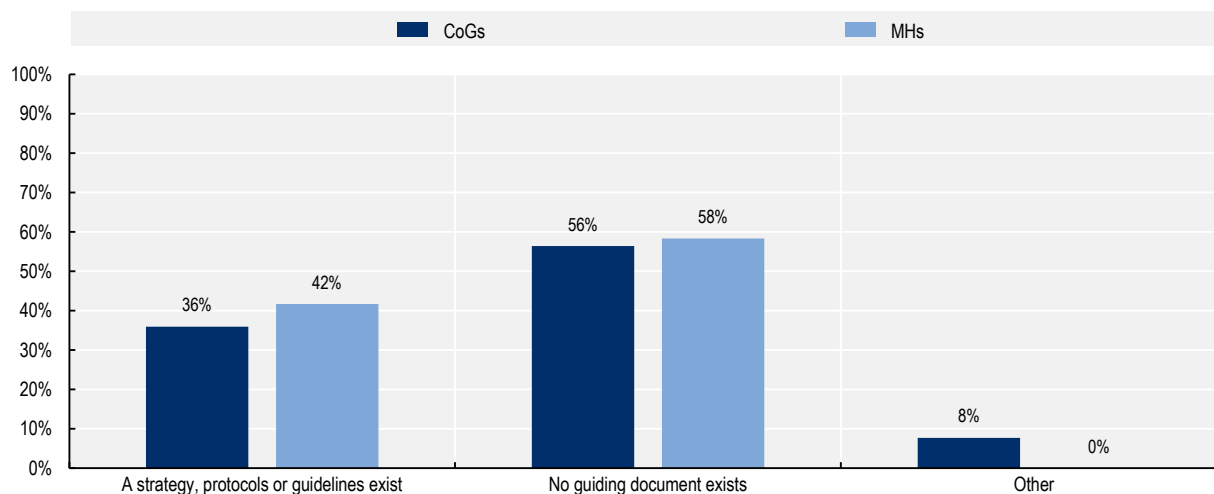
Note: n CoGs = 35 ; n MHs = 22. In the dedicated line to the internal communication competency, Austria, Germany, Romania and Slovenia did not provide data in their response to this question in the CoG survey. In Belgium, it was noted that internal communication falls under the mandate of the SPF Support and Strategy (BOSA), which was not the respondent to the survey; Japan and Jordan did not provide a response to this question in the MH survey.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

Internal communication, however, can also benefit from its integration within a given institution and across government. This implies the establishment of partnerships across the organisation, including via policy teams, committees or networks as well as support services such as human resources, external relations and information systems departments, to contribute to competency-development programmes, performance management and employee engagement. In particular, political leaders play a key role in setting a joint vision aligning activities under precise goals and values, setting clear expectations and providing opportunities for civil servants to contribute and raise concerns (Sasse, 2016<sup>[12]</sup>).

While efforts to institutionalise internal communication in CoGs and MHs are widespread, data suggested that the use of overarching frameworks to support its strategic application was not a common practice in most surveyed countries. In fact, only 36% of CoGs and 42% of MHs had in place a dedicated strategy, protocol or set of guidelines to engage employees, boost morale and facilitate information sharing across the organisation (Figure 7.5). Low levels of institutionalisation across OECD member and partner countries suggest that there is room to leverage the strategic value of internal communication beyond its role to facilitate information-sharing across the public sector.

**Figure 7.5. Use of strategies, protocols or guidelines for internal communication by CoGs and MHs**



Note: n CoG = 39; n MH = 24.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

According to data collected through the OECD survey, the nature of guiding documents in OECD member and partner countries varied in their level of formality and the objectives included therein. In some countries, frameworks (e.g. in Australia and the United Kingdom) or guidelines and manuals (e.g. in Belgium, Colombia, Estonia, Italy,<sup>7</sup> Sweden and Switzerland) were used to set the overall vision of this competency, establish roles and responsibilities, as well as the scope of activities (Box 7.10). They may also outline specific procedures to be followed and, in a few cases, good practices or case studies. Acknowledging its value as a lever for promoting transparency and efficiency, the government of Colombia, for example, translated these principles into action through the yearly development of an internal communication plan. In other countries, more informal approaches were adopted through the development of simple guiding principles or documents for the use of specific tools or services (e.g. in Canada and Norway) or on the main policies and processes in place (e.g. in Ecuador and Poland).

### Box 7.10. A snapshot of internal communication strategies, protocols and guidelines in OECD countries

#### The Internal Communication Guide for Federal Communicators in Belgium

The aim of this guide, or “COMM Collection” is to detail the vision and mission of internal communication within the federal administration. It provides federal communicators with recommendations and good practices on how to foster internal communication within their organisation. It is based on the following five principles:

1. Implementing internal communication within the first stages of the decision-making process.
2. Facilitating interactions through the use of mixed media, online and informal communication.
3. Supporting the organisational vision through adequate resources and guidelines.
4. Partnering and engaging with different support services (i.e. ICT and human resource services).
5. Communicating internally before doing so externally.

#### The United Kingdom’s Government Communication Service (GCS) Internal Communication Operating Model 2.0

To ensure effective and efficient internal communications across departments, the United Kingdom’s GCS developed a model building on five core pillars as depicted in the picture below.

Source: <https://ic-space.gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/strategy-and-internal-communications/creating-a-consistent-standard-for-internal-communications/>; <https://fedweb.belgium.be/sites/default/files/downloads/COMM%20Coll%203%20Vision%20interne%20FR.pdf>; [https://fedweb.belgium.be/fr/publications/cc03\\_vision\\_mission\\_communication\\_interne](https://fedweb.belgium.be/fr/publications/cc03_vision_mission_communication_interne).

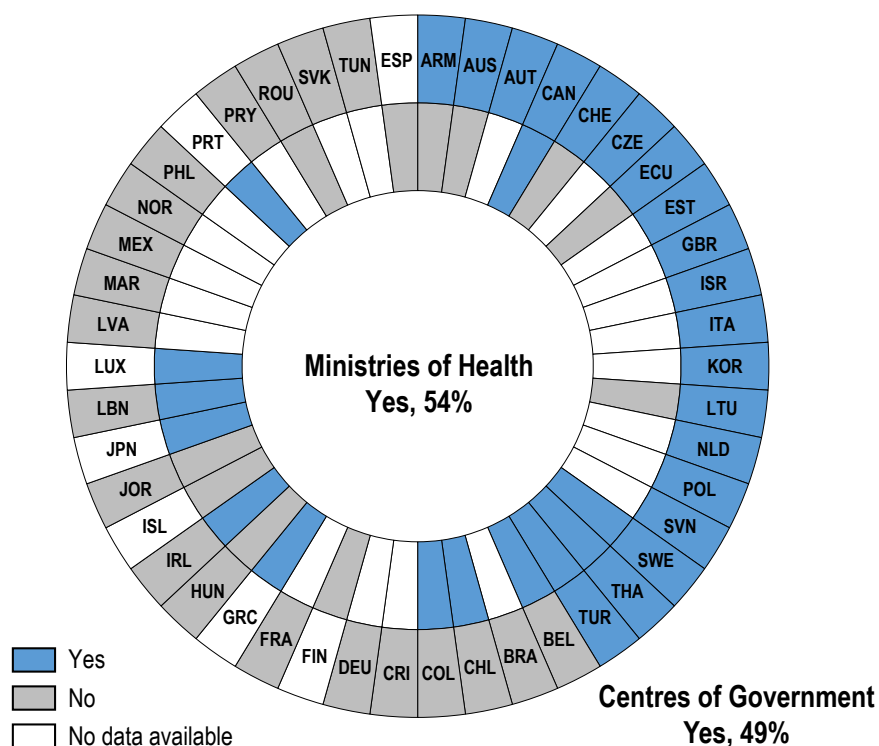
Where strategies, protocols or guidelines did not exist, evidence suggested that internal communication was carried out on an ad hoc basis. At times, such approaches may not allow internal communication to fulfil its objectives. An irregular or inconsistent approach may also have the adverse effect of disengaging staff through seemingly unorganised, top-down and unresponsive communication. These factors may pose challenges for leaders to build trust and mobilise stakeholders (Vuori, Aher and Kylänen, 2020<sup>[13]</sup>; Yang and Maxwell, 2011<sup>[14]</sup>).

To address these effects, internal audience insights can be significant means to designing the appropriate mix of communication tools, messages and channels that will effectively inform, consult and engage the public service. Through collecting internal audience insights, governments can build an understanding of the concerns, habits, awareness levels and motivations of public sector employees to ensure that internal communication allows for public institutions to work towards common goals and speak with one voice. Leveraging insights from internal audiences can also promote user-centric communication in which stakeholders can have a personalised experience to access information and submit queries.

In practice, the lack of insight gathering within the public sector in both OECD member and partner countries is correlated to the fact internal communication is underutilised in achieving broader strategic policy objectives. Indeed, compared to the percentage of countries gathering insights on external audiences, only 49% of CoGs and 54% of MHs commissioned these insights for internal publics (Figure 7.6). The limited internal audience segmentation in surveyed countries was consistent with the fact that only 3 out of 39 CoGs and 7 out of 24 MHs considered changing behaviours of government employees as an important objective of communication. Nevertheless, understanding the needs of internal audiences and reflecting such preferences in key messages, tools and engagement opportunities is ever more important namely in light of generational shifts in the public sector workforce (Neill, 2015<sup>[15]</sup>).



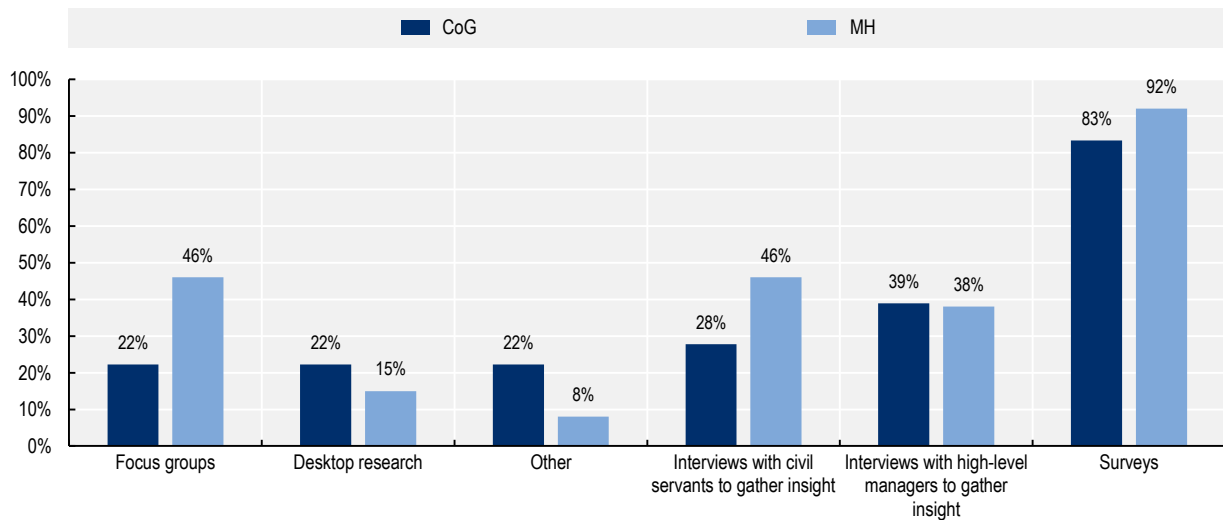
**Figure 7.6. Internal audience insight collection in CoGs and MHs**



Note: n CoG = 39; n MH = 24. The inner circle refers to the responses of ministries of health, whereas the outer ring refers to the responses of centres of government.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

As Figure 7.7 illustrates, countries employ different methods to better understand internal publics. Evidence suggests that surveys are the most popular method, followed by interviews with high-level managers or civil servants. Data collected also highlights that surveys typically measured general employee satisfaction (e.g. in Australia, Canada, Czech Republic, Norway and Slovenia) or perceptions and insights after each internal event or campaign (e.g. Ecuador and Korea) (Box 7.11). For example, the Czech Republic mentioned in its response to the OECD survey that this process was conducted in co-ordination with union representatives to ensure legitimacy and hold internal communicators accountable for improvements. Italy conducted usability testing of institutional sites across public sector organisations. Other countries, such as Ecuador and Thailand, leveraged induction sessions to better understand the expectations and needs of new employees for their communication work. These practices together illustrate the potential of analysing internal audience insights to optimise communications with public employees, promote cross-department information sharing, create buy-in and a sense of involvement, and thus support service delivery.

**Figure 7.7. Methods for gathering internal audience insights in CoGs and MHs**

Note: Calculations were based on a total of 18 CoGs and 13 MHs that responded to the previous question in their respective survey that they collect internal audience insights. Austria did not provide a response to this question.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

### Box 7.11. Examples of internal audience insight gathering

#### Canada

To inform its internal communications, the Government of Canada conducted the Public Service Employee Survey in 2019, administered by a market and social research firm on behalf of the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer of the Treasury Board of Canada. The survey's objective was to measure the opinions of federal government employees on internal policies regarding general well-being, compensation and opportunities for engagement to support the continuous improvement of "people management practices". The survey results were used to identify challenges and good practices, benchmark and track progress over time as well as inform the development and refinement of action plans. Overall, 182 306 employees from 86 departments agencies took the survey, amounting to a 62% response rate.

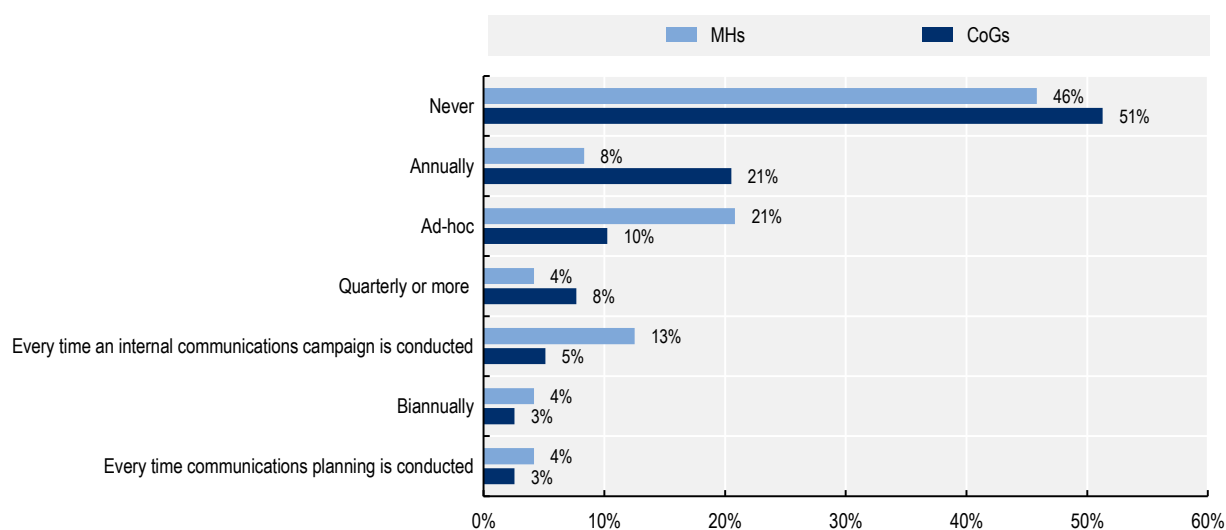
#### Ecuador

As part of its communication planning in 2019, the government of Ecuador conducted a series of studies to increase its understanding of internal audiences in view of informing the design and delivery of its communication campaigns. A satisfaction survey was carried out across all relevant ministries to gauge the rate of acceptance of internal communication activities. This allowed the identification of good practices as well as information gaps across institutions. A survey analysing the labour environment was also conducted to measure the rate of employee satisfaction. These insights informed the development of the country's new internal communication plan and identified areas for future improvement.

Source: Adapted from inputs shared by the governments of Canada and Ecuador to the OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication"; <https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/innovation/public-service-employee-survey/2019-public-service-employee-survey-pses/about-2019-public-service-employee-survey.html>.

While measuring the quality of audience insights was outside the scope of this report, the frequency with which they are commissioned points to a variety of approaches (Figure 7.8). Most CoGs and MHs who commissioned internal audience research did so on a one-off annual (8 out of 19 and 2 out of 13 respectively) or ad hoc basis (4 out of 19 and 5 out of 13), in stark contrast with those that did so regularly; for example, every time a campaign was conducted (2 out of 19 and 3 out of 13) or for the planning of communication (1 out of 19 and 1 out of 13).

**Figure 7.8. Frequency of internal audience insights collection in CoGs and MHs**



Note: n CoGs = 39; n MHs = 24.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

### ***Ensuring internal communication practices effectively engage staff***

To ensure the effectiveness of and support for a given institution's vision, public officials must perceive it to be valid, efficient and implementable. Communicating effectively with the individuals tasked with implementing such a vision is crucial to enhancing buy-in and involvement (OECD, 2019<sub>[10]</sub>) (OECD, 2016<sub>[16]</sub>). The planning stage of the internal outreach strategy is therefore critical to ensuring that all relevant actors are reached and heard, as well as that the means employed align with objectives set by the leadership.

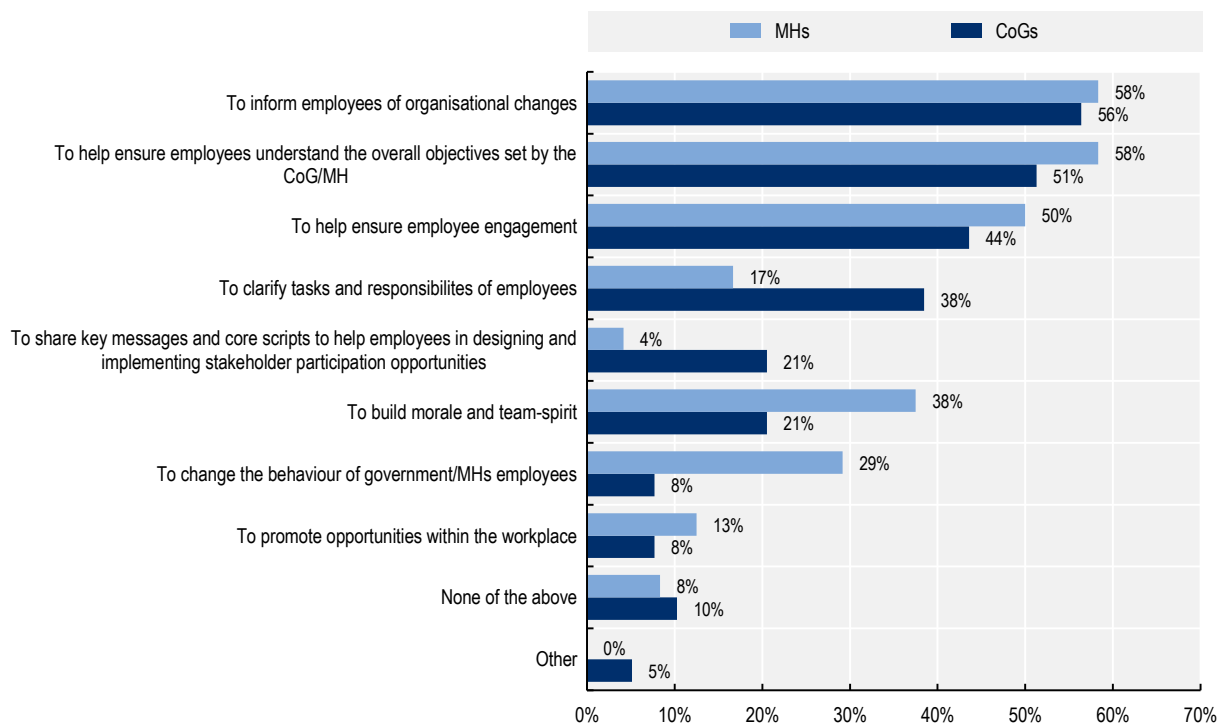
Survey results suggest that internal communication within CoGs and MHs can more effectively:

- provide channels and methods for employee engagement throughout the service delivery and communication cycles
- disseminate cross-government campaigns and other large-scale information-sharing endeavours, which are in part constrained by financial resources; and
- build employee morale, promote opportunities within the institution and change behaviours, all of which are key elements of promoting the engagement of internal stakeholders and creating occasions for more strategic internal communication practices.

Figure 7.9 provides an overview of the most important objectives for conducting internal communications in OECD member and partner countries surveyed. At the centre of government level, a majority considered informing employees of organisational changes (56%), ensuring employees understand objectives set by the CoG (51%) and supporting employee engagement (44%) as the top three priorities. These trends were also largely consistent with data collected in MHs. CoGs prioritised objectives regarding sharing key

messages and core scripts, building morale and team spirit (21%) and changing behaviours (8%) to a significantly lesser extent. For their part, MHs noted that sharing key messages and core scripts to help employees in designing and implementing stakeholder participation opportunities as the least important objective.

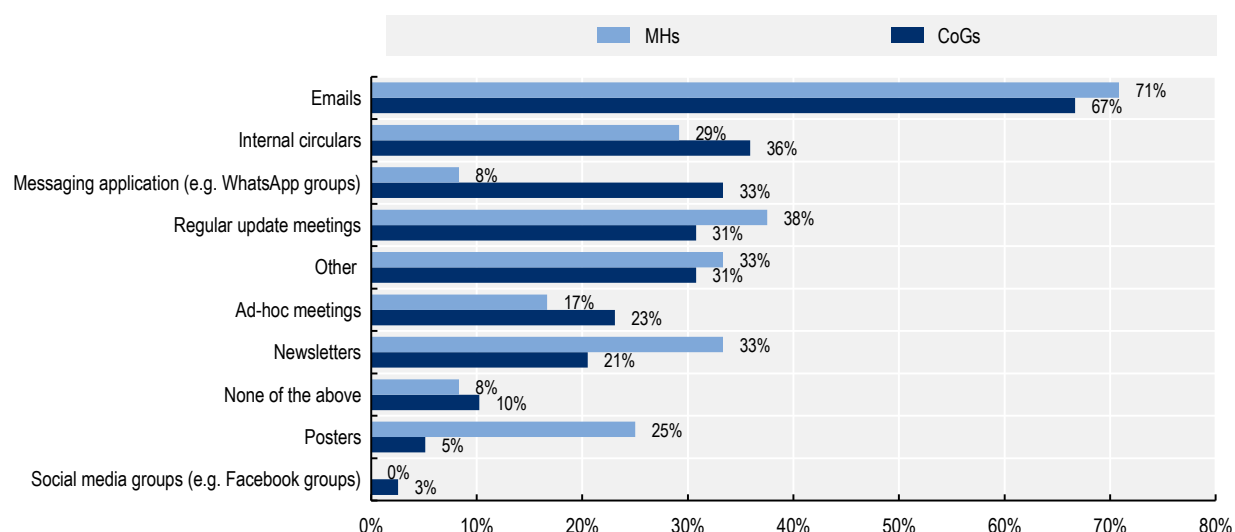
**Figure 7.9. Most important objectives of CoGs and MHs for conducting internal communications**



Note: n CoG = 39 ; n MH = 24. Respondents were asked to select up to three options.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

While responses collected suggest governments recognise the importance of promoting employee engagement (in 44% of CoGs for example), the most popular internal communication channels employed by respondents favours a less dynamic and unidirectional information-sharing approach. In fact, 67% of CoGs and 71% of MHs used institutional emails as their primary means of reaching employees. Other mechanisms such as internal circulars (36% of CoGs and 29% of MHs) and intranets or internal websites (31% of CoGs and 33% of MHs mentioned them under "other") were also utilised for such a purpose to a more moderate extent (Figure 7.10). Interactive channels that have the potential to foster better listening and participation, such as regular update meetings (31% of CoGs and 38% of MHs), messaging platforms (33% of CoGs and 8% of MHs) and social media groups (3% of CoGs and 0 MHs) were less favoured.

**Figure 7.10. Main channels used by CoGs and MHs to conduct internal communications**

Note: n CoG=39 ; n MHs=24. Respondents were asked to select up to three options.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

While the ability to “push” information is necessary, it is not sufficient to effectively engage employees. Combining new and traditional communication formats to open spaces for dialogue can help public sector institutions empower employees, mobilise action for the attainment of strategic goals and facilitate relationship building among staff. Establishing meaningful communication in this regard also allows for greater buy-in of internal policies, helps resolve conflicts, and facilitates the acceptance of internal changes (OECD, 2016<sup>[16]</sup>). In addition to traditional means, the government of Turkey, for example, uses a more hands-on approach to deploy internal communications around its vision, through the direct involvement of staff in developing the government communication strategy (Box 7.12).

### **Box 7.12. Promoting the participation of public officials in designing the strategic planning process of the Directorate of Communications (DoC) in Turkey**

In 2019, the DoC established the “Committee for Strategic Planning”, comprising senior DoC officials. As part of the strategic planning process, the committee held weekly meetings to evaluate the studies conducted by thematic sub-committees of the Strategy Development Department. These studies compiled a series of needs, comments and inputs on strategic priorities gathered through surveys from external and internal stakeholders. To complement this approach, the government launched a training programme to increase awareness about activities under the strategy at all levels of the DoC and beyond, and to solicit feedback on implemented actions and policies, exchange information, and encourage two-way communication. In addition, satisfaction surveys and group interviews were conducted with staff to ascertain their views, attitudes and perceptions and determine their satisfaction levels. The 2019 government communication strategy was drafted and finalised, drawing on the feedback, recommendations, and ideas gathered through this initiative.

Source: Adapted from inputs shared by the government of Turkey to the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication”.

Survey results also revealed opportunities to amplify the scope and reach of internal communication practices beyond a given institution. The share of CoGs that conducted internal communication campaigns was low across both OECD member and partner countries, with less than half deploying these types of initiatives to disseminate key messages. In terms of their frequency, most CoGs that conducted internal communication campaigns did so on an ad hoc basis (9 out of 18), followed by quarterly (7 out of 18) and annual (2 out of 18) initiatives. The more infrequent and limited use of this type of campaigns can likely be explained by the challenges posed by financial resources available, with only 5 CoGs declaring a dedicated budget for this activity.

The need to deliver internal communication under constrained resources may also help drive the adoption of digital tools to communicate with internal publics in more rapid, informal and cost-effective ways. In the Latin America and the Caribbean region, for example, there was an interesting trend toward the use of groups within instant messaging platforms (e.g. WhatsApp) to promote informal relationship building and swift information sharing. Other countries made use of online memo boards (e.g. Slovenia) and weekly bulletins with information on main policies and reforms (e.g. Ecuador).

In addition, several countries such as the Czech Republic, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have created and/or invested in intranets as collaborative online ecosystems for knowledge sharing, project management and engagement with stakeholders across departments. Survey results also identified new methods complementing traditional one-way information sharing channels (e.g. websites, emails and newsletters), such as the use of podcasts by the government of Norway (Box 7.13).

### **Box 7.13. Podcasts as a tool for internal communication in the Norwegian Public Administration**

Within the context of National Security Month, the government of Norway launched a series of podcasts in October 2019, produced by the Norwegian Government Security and Service Organisation and the National Security Authority. It aimed to inform and engage ministry employees in security-relevant policies and activities. The podcasts were launched via both extranet and intranets, and are available and open for all users to stream on several apps, including Sound Cloud, Spotify and Player FM.

Source: Adapted from inputs shared by the government of Norway to the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication”.

While digital tools offer new opportunities to connect and facilitate information-sharing, efforts to build employee morale, recognise good practice and promote peer learning are also necessary to foster a positive climate in the civil service. Integrity campaigns within the civil service, for example, have aimed to raise awareness, build capacity and ensure ownership of shared values, standards and mechanisms (OECD, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>). They ultimately are instrumental in building long-term commitment, helping promote a consistent dissemination of norms (i.e. in legal and regulatory frameworks, codes of conduct or ethics), fostering a culture of openness and changing behaviours through meaningful exchanges with internal audiences.

In practice, these efforts can take the form of internal communication campaigns, posters, brochures or digital tools. Countries such as Mexico and New Zealand as well as the sub-national government in the Canadian province of Alberta have used internal communication to make such values identifiable, visible and known across government institutions (Box 7.14). Other communication tools such as copies of codes or guidelines, ideas boxes, notes on employees’ boards, computer screen savers or notifications (e.g. on a tip of the week, civil service value of the month, etc.) can help raise awareness and ownership of integrity standards (OECD, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>).

### Box 7.14. Posters to foster integrity within administrations: Examples from Canada, Mexico and New Zealand

In Canada, the government of Alberta's Public Interest Commission designed posters to be distributed to public entities to foster ethical behaviour. Messages encouraged public officials to "Make a change by making a call. Be a hero for Alberta's public interest". In Mexico and New Zealand, posters were used to describe standard values and constitutional principles of the civil service and make them visible and memorable for public officials.

Sources: CBC News (2015<sub>[17]</sub>), "Whistleblower law needs better promotion, ombudsman says", <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/new-brunswick/whistleblower-law-needs-better-promotion-ombudsman-says-1.3144625> (accessed on 13 May 2021); Secretaría de la Función Pública, Mexico (2018<sub>[18]</sub>), *Principios Constitucionales*, Unidad de ética, Integridad Pública y Prevención de Conflictos de Intereses; NZALS (2017<sub>[19]</sub>), *Code of Conduct Policy*, New Zealand Artificial Limb Service, <https://www.nzals.co.nz/assets/Policy-Forms/Code-of-Conduct-Policy.pdf>.

## Communicating efficiently and inclusively during crises

Communicating during a crisis is a central function of public communication that immediately supports policy implementation. It ensures the timely, transparent and effective dissemination of information on the situation to stakeholders, as well as measures adopted to address it, supporting crisis policy application and emergency service delivery. It helps provide the necessary messages to ensure individuals are able to protect themselves and to comply with preventive, protective or rescue measures.

Governments undertake crisis communications when an unexpected event occurs that could negatively affect the government's reputation or endanger citizens. A crisis is understood as a threat to operations or reputations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly.<sup>8</sup> This can take many forms, including natural disasters, catastrophes, attacks, pandemics, etc.

Crisis communication consists of "communicating messages on the status of a crisis, its impacts, the actions and measures that have been mobilised" (Baubion, 2013<sub>[20]</sub>). Its importance has been further highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it has proven instrumental in disseminating and supporting the implementation of health measures and recovery policies. In this regard, CoGs have played a crucial role notably in ensuring coherence of government messages both internally and vis-à-vis the public and civil society, reaching specific segments of the population and facilitating dialogue with citizens to develop policies and services adapted to their needs and expectations (OECD, 2020<sub>[21]</sub>).

This section explores how countries structure and apply crisis communication, based on their answers to the OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication". While it includes examples linked to COVID-19, it does not assess government communication during this pandemic specifically. Despite the challenges posed by this competency to 58% of CoGs<sup>9</sup> and 54% of MHs, many redeployed resources or allocated extra staff, notably to support media monitoring and handling media relations, performing digital communications, and co-ordinating and evaluating efforts in this field. Beyond its information provision role, this section also analyses how this key competency can further be used as a lever for accountability and stakeholder participation to contribute to upholding democratic principles, including in unexpected circumstances.

## ***Design, structures and staffing of crisis communications***

To support emergency and recovery measures, survey results as they are detailed below point to an emphasis on the need for a clear, rapid and reliable communication response, and a majority of countries having defined crisis communication structures with protocols and criteria to manage crises, designating spokespersons. Furthermore, it is common for countries to redeploy resources and/or allocate extra capacity to specific crisis communication arrangements, including media and social media activities as well as co-ordination and evaluation.

During a crisis, the careful design of a clear, rapid and reliable communication response is instrumental in reducing uncertainty throughout society, which tends to dramatically increase in times of crises (Sanders, 2020<sup>[22]</sup>), and in generating trust. Messages designed with reliability, integrity and responsiveness, which are main drivers of trust (OECD/KDI, 2018<sup>[23]</sup>), are thus key during such events. Some countries have recognised this in their crisis-response communication protocols. For example, the United Kingdom emergency planning protocol stresses that “a strong crisis communication strategy can keep stakeholders informed, build and maintain public trust in the government and ensure accurate information is being reported by the media” (UK GCS, 2020<sup>[24]</sup>).

Survey respondents and workshop participants also noted that individuals’ reactions and attitudes, especially in the COVID-19 context, stressed high expectations in terms of governments’ clear, reliable and trustworthy messages.<sup>10</sup> Contributors stressed that actions rely on using relevant information and sharing them with the public in an honest and simple manner to provide a clear understanding of the situation. Evidence-based communication efforts to describe steps taken, actors involved, expectations and targeted results help reduce doubts (for some practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, see Box 7.15). Under these conditions, public crisis communication can fully play its role in ensuring individuals trust the measures adopted and implement safe behaviours (OECD, 2020<sup>[25]</sup>).

### **Box 7.15. Good practices to ensure reliable communication in the COVID-19 pandemic**

In 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak, governments had to ensure public communication was a responsive and reliable tool to promote the implementation of and compliance with public decisions and protective measures.

Most governments held daily briefings to keep citizens informed and updated. Some of them, including the Republic of Korea, held these twice a day. The federal government of Belgium also offered regular press conferences where medical staff and scientific experts intervened alongside government officials and, in Portugal, scientific experts delivered public briefings on the pandemic. These various arrangements were not only opportunities to present figures and facts about the evolution of the pandemic, but also a way to address questions, reinforce official narratives and debunk mis- and disinformation.

To support trustworthy communication in uncertain times, some countries also stressed ethics. The Government of Canada’s Emergency Management Framework explicitly details the importance of ethical communication responses. Considering the impact of crises and their management on lives, the environment, property and the economy, decisions “must be weighed carefully within the context of emergency management ethics and values. Whole-of-society partnerships based on effective collaboration, co-ordination and communication are key”.

Source: (Public Safety Canada, 2017<sup>[26]</sup>; OECD, 2020<sup>[25]</sup>).

In terms of enacting overall crisis responses, 63% of CoGs<sup>11</sup> surveyed indicated that they had defined protocols or standards to react in case a crisis occurs. National context-specific institutional arrangements present a wide array of approaches and their presence helps establish strong crisis policies and practices



(OECD, 2016<sup>[27]</sup>). A vast majority have criteria, protocols or frameworks for crisis management and some countries had also codified specific communication guidelines or frameworks. They often defined shared responsibilities at national and subnational levels of government to implement overall crisis responses (OECD, 2016<sup>[27]</sup>), and also allocated communication roles. Moreover, almost all CoGs and all MHs had assigned roles for communication to an identified individual or organisation and a large majority had created co-ordination mechanisms, not only for overall crisis management but also for communication purposes.

As a first enabling step for a clear, rapid and reliable communication during crises, some countries have established and codified communication manuals or procedures to support the timely and transparent delivery of messages. They include crisis communication frameworks (e.g. the United Kingdom emergency planning framework), specific communication sections in crisis response decision trees (e.g. in Costa Rica, see Box 7.16), plans (e.g. in Thailand), acts (e.g. in Switzerland) and policies (e.g. in Canada).

Respondents to the survey stressed that such codified procedures have been used to implement dedicated protective or recovery measures for recent incidents, disasters, or migration crises, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. Some survey responses and exchanges held in the framework of validation workshops further suggest that lessons learned and practices implemented in the context of the coronavirus outbreak will be used to help further strengthen and adapt the crisis communication processes.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, these recent crises have highlighted the increasing complexity of crisis response procedures, as well as the need for the development of clearer objectives and strategies to communicate government measures to the population. While this chapter does not aim to evaluate government communication during the COVID-19 pandemic, further research on this topic could be conducted.

### Box 7.16. Costa Rica crisis communication decision tree

The crisis communication decision tree in Costa Rica represents a systematic approach to disseminating messages to the population by elaborating structures and protocols to be adapted based on the nature of the crisis. Its purpose is to create a unified process and regroup management and communication resources so that the Ministry of Communication has a quick and effective response to relevant negative events or major media crises that alter the functioning and image of the government.

The tree is constructed as follows:

#### 1. Initial Response

The initial response depends on the type of crisis. Crises are divided into two types:

- Disaster or emergency, political, financial and environmental crises: The initial response is to activate the Crisis Committee.
- Legal, personal and sexual crises: The initial response is to conduct an office meeting between the Minister and Director of Communication. Following the meeting, the Crisis Committee is activated.

#### 2. Elaborating a plan

The second step is to elaborate a crisis communication plan, by defining messaging, formats, communication products and a designated team.

#### 3. Actions

The third and final component involves specific communication actions:

- informing the co-ordinators
- designing the team that will take the lead in managing the crisis and distributing tasks
- creating a team communication channel (e.g. WhatsApp group)

- executing previously set products and formats
- monitoring crisis communication actions.

Source: Adapted from inputs shared by the government of Costa Rica to the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication; Crisis Communication Plan, Ministry of Communication, October 2019.

Where countries do not have written protocols and criteria in place, survey results pointed to other approaches. For example, some centres of government or ministries of health that did not have codified criteria, protocols or manuals reacted and adapted their functioning and activities to respond to situations, events and emergencies as they came up. Such flexible arrangements were used to manage crises and related communication in countries such as the Czech Republic, Estonia, and Mexico.

Another element explaining the diversity of country approaches is the level at which the crisis response is enacted. In federal countries, crisis response and related public communication activities may be entrusted to subnational governments or be a shared responsibility between the federal and local authorities, in line with the national constitutional and legal orders. Survey responses highlighted that in Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada and Germany for example, crisis management and communication was a shared competency between the central and subnational governments, with a federal lead and phased-out approach between the centre of government and the federated entities, depending on the scale and reach of the crisis, as in Belgium, and often relying on a federal framework with responsibilities assigned to subnational entities, as it is the case in Australia for example (Box 7.17).

In addition, at a supra-national level, the European Union (EU) established the Integrated Political Crisis Response mechanism (IPCR) Crisis Communication Network (CCN). The IPCR “supports rapid and co-ordinated decision-making at EU political level for major and complex crises” and its CCN brings together crisis managers or communication experts from member states and EU bodies to help share lessons learned from practices.

### **Box 7.17. Codifying communication during crises in federal countries: The experience in Australia**

The Australian government has established clear frameworks at the national and subnational government levels to codify its communication during crises or emergencies.

At the national level, specific co-ordination arrangements for crises are established and outlined in the Australian Government Crisis Management Framework (AGCMF). Indeed, the AGCMF is designed to be applicable in crises of all kinds, covering management phases of prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Moreover, the framework elaborates written plans, policies and procedures, including detailed arrangements for co-ordinating communication and disseminating timely, important information to the public.

In a similar way, frameworks also exist at subnational levels. For example, the government of New South Wales has elaborated a State Emergency Management Plan, describing its approach to crisis management, planning and policy framework, co-ordination arrangements, and roles and responsibilities of agencies. In addition, the plan defines specific objectives and principles related to functional areas, recovery processes, and community and stakeholder engagement. The framework is further supported by a series of sub plans and functional area supporting plans, which include guidance for communicating with the public in a timely and effective manner.

Source: Adapted from inputs shared by the Australian government to the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication”; <https://www.emergency.nsw.gov.au/Documents/publications/20181207-NSW-state-emergency-management-plan.pdf>.

A second enabler of a swift and trustworthy communication response during crises lies in clarifying roles for disseminating governments' messages. The vast majority (90%) of CoGs and all MHs mentioned they designated a spokesperson to act as the main intermediary with the public. In this regard, 69% of CoGs assigned the responsibility to communicate governments' measures to the highest political levels (President or Prime Minister, Minister or Secretary of State). Such arrangements support the leadership, coherent voice and communication of the government (OECD, 2016<sup>[27]</sup>), as a clear and high-level spokesperson role reduces the number of sources and the likelihood of different or even diverging messages that can result from various actors speaking on behalf of a government. In addition, 8% of CoGs mentioned that they had an administrative ministerial spokesperson (e.g. secretary general, head of services, director) and 13% assigned this role to other organisations or actors such as experts. As illustrated by Table 7.1, responses to the survey revealed common roles applied by spokespersons across all countries.

**Table 7.1. Spokespersons' responsibilities**

Actors	Main assigned crisis communication responsibilities
President or Prime Minister	Announcing high-level orientations and decisions Detailing decrees and measures to be adopted Communicating up-to-date and accurate information
Minister or Secretary of State of Health	Communicating on the diagnosis Detailing governments' preventive and response measures Communicating up-to-date and accurate information
Ministerial Spokesperson	Communicating on the diagnosis Informing the public on implementation of measures Communicating up-to-date and accurate information
Other	Combination of both political announcements and technical responsibilities Flexible arrangements depending on circumstances and nature of the crisis, etc.

Source: adapted from 39 CoGs responses to the OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

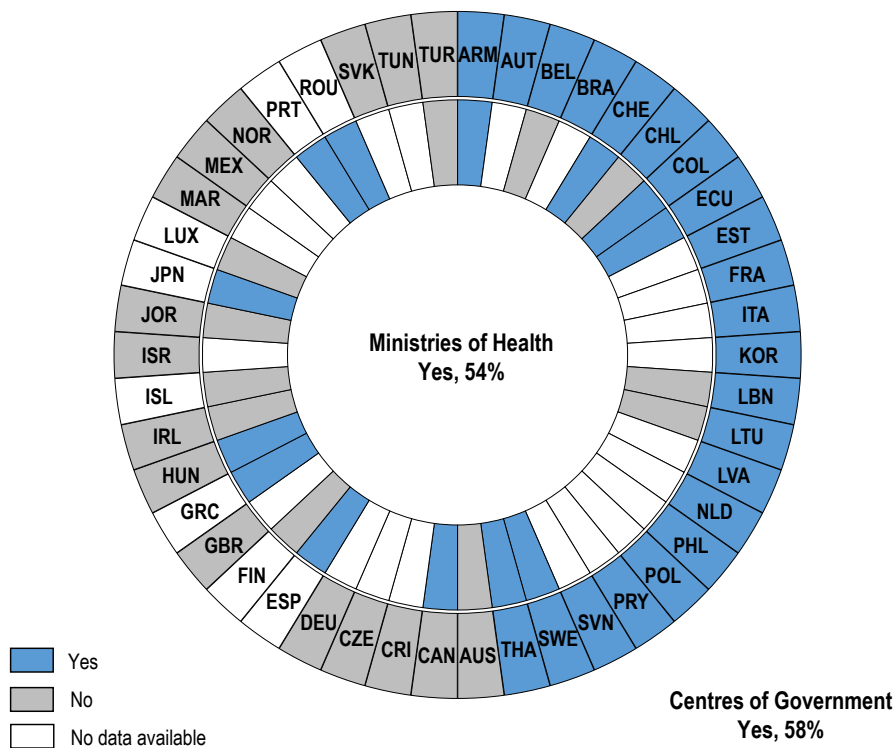
In unprecedented circumstances, these government spokespersons and communicators may face dilemmas in finding an appropriate level of transparency, notably in uncertain situations, when errors have occurred or where there are knowledge gaps. At the same time, they face the need to instil credibility and confidence (Page, 2020<sup>[28]</sup>). In this delicate balance, consistency and transparency about strategic and operational objectives are central to ensuring support for emergency measures, policies and delivery of services (Page, 2020<sup>[28]</sup>). They are also key for implementation and trust, as citizens' judgment on actions implemented relate to "competence, fairness, honesty, caring, accountability, and transparency of leaders or risk managers" and can thus be driven by the "characteristics and performance of official spokespersons" (Moreno, Fuentes-Lara and Navarro, 2020<sup>[29]</sup>).

In the face of crises, practices described by survey respondents demonstrated that many countries utilised a combination of actors to serve as spokespersons. Despite a large tendency to assign this function to the highest political levels, 51% of CoGs also sought interventions from other actors such as administrative officials and/or experts and scientists. More precisely, survey data indicated that 18% of CoGs partnered with experts to drive more credible and evidence-based communications. This was the case in 2020 in the regular joint press conferences held in response to the coronavirus outbreak in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Costa Rica, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, for example.

Irrespective of the selected approach and assigned roles, effective communication activities and messages deployed in the framework of governments' crisis responses are dependent on resources and instruments to implement them in a coherent and consistent manner. This is key to ensuring governments reach their audiences and share messages about the actions and measures to be implemented (OECD, 2020<sup>[25]</sup>) while being one of the most complex competencies that public communicators face.

Survey results indicated that communicating during a crisis is particularly challenging for governments, with 58% of CoGs surveyed (22 out of 38 countries) selecting it as the most challenging communication competency (Figure 7.11). Among the CoGs selecting “communicating during a crisis” as a challenge, 77% cite human resources and 73% co-ordination as reasons for the challenge—notably, 64% mentioned both issues as main reasons. Responses to the survey and the experiences shared in follow-up research highlight the complexity of implementing effective and efficient crisis communication. Independent of the institutional and governance variables covered in Chapter 2, this competency presents unique challenges even when resources, robust procedures and appropriate and flexible staffing arrangements are in place.

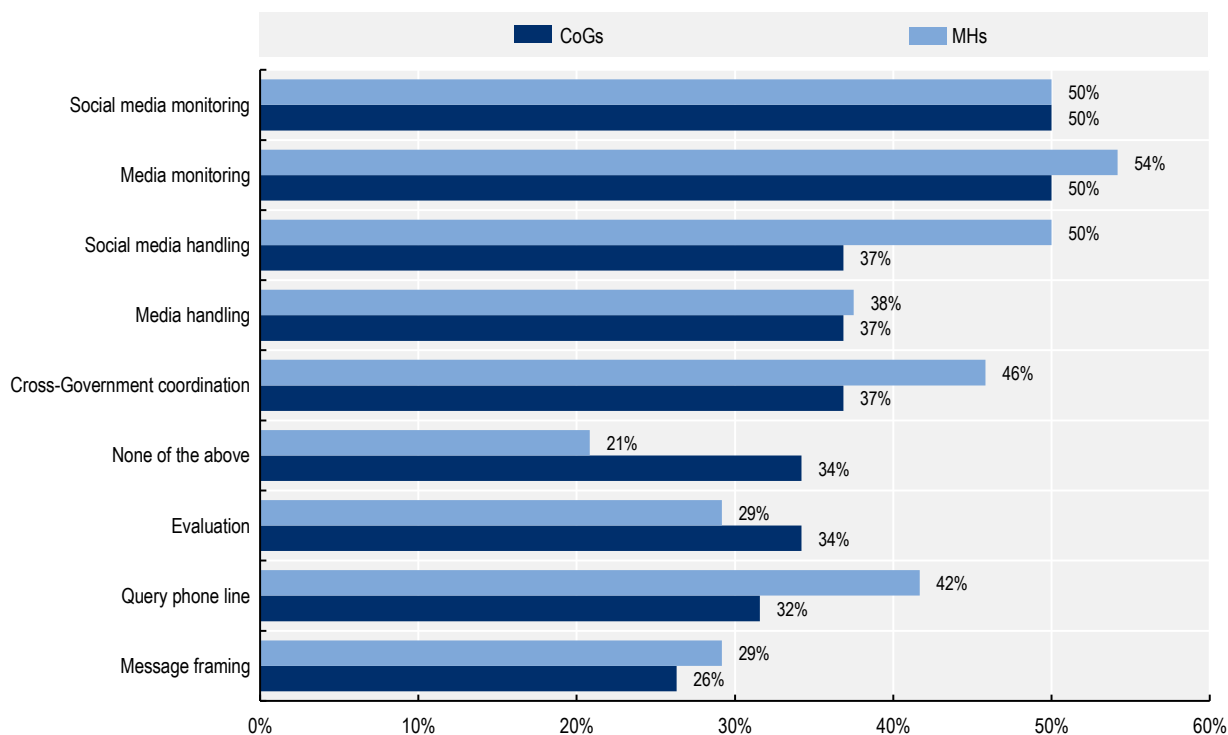
**Figure 7.11. Communicating during a crisis is a top challenge for over half of CoGs and MHs**



Note: n CoG = 38 ; n MH = 24. Romania did not provide a response to this question in the CoG survey.  
Source: OECD 2020 survey “Understanding Public Communication”.

The majority of countries (66% of CoGs) provided surge capacity to support information dissemination and communication activities in times of crisis in response to the challenges raised by this competency, the diverse and evolving nature of crises, and increased concerns, questions and requests from citizens, stakeholders and the media. This highlights the ability of CoGs to adapt their function and staffing to communicate more swiftly and effectively in case of emergency. These extra or surge capacity staff are mostly used to conduct social media and media monitoring (50% for each), with around one-third of respondents focused on social media and media handling<sup>13</sup>, cross-government communication co-ordination and evaluation (Figure 7.12).

**Figure 7.12. Allocated roles of extra or surge capacity to support communication functions in times of crisis within CoGs and MHs**



Note: n CoG = 38. Lebanon did not provide an answer ; n MH = 24.  
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

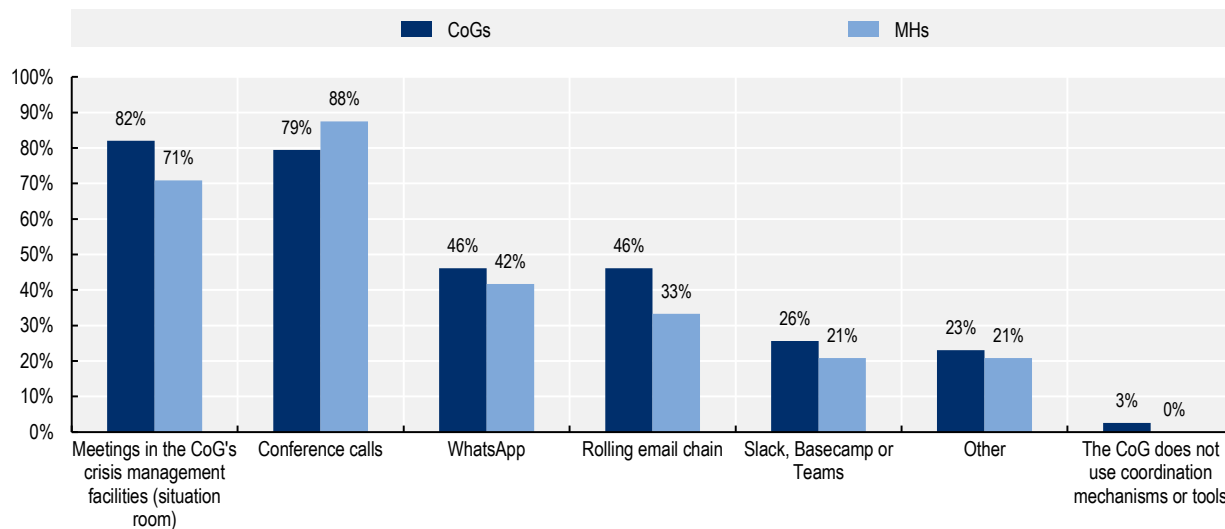
The focus of surge capacity staff on social media monitoring is consistent with the survey finding that communicating during a crisis was the number one objective selected for the use of digital communications (58%),<sup>14</sup> again pointing to the function of digital tools. Furthermore, one-third of CoGs and MHs assigned their additional staff to conduct communication co-ordination and evaluation efforts. These two components can contribute to ensuring the consistency and relevance of messaging, as well as gathering inputs, ideas and data on the impact of past or ongoing campaigns and activities. As such, these roles support evidence-driven and transparent messages, consistently disseminated by all government communicators (Box 7.19).

However, although a majority of CoGs allocated surge capacity staff to crisis communication, respondents still pointed to a need for additional human resources to overcome the complexity of the situations they faced and improve responses. Evidence shared points to difficult or unclear procedures to follow for co-ordinating communication activities, disseminating governments' measures, and/or responding to citizens' and stakeholders' questions, concerns and other requests during crises.

With regards to co-ordination mechanisms for crisis communication, 97% of CoGs and all MHs had methods in place. An overwhelming majority of them (82% and 71% respectively) used meetings in the CoG's crisis management facilities, followed by conference calls (79% and 88%). These two options traditionally allow governments to gather a large number of stakeholders involved in managing the crises in one physical or virtual location to communicate with them about the situation. Nonetheless, other tools that provide means to create similar virtual gathering conditions, such as messaging and video platforms, were less prioritised. Digital messaging platforms such as WhatsApp have been used as rapid information sharing tools by close to half of CoGs (46%) and 42% of MHs (Figure 7.13). A similar proportion use rolling

email chains for the same purposes. To keep track of these online and offline emergency discussions or information diffusions, 84% of respondents reported having minutes or co-ordination reports.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 7.13. Cross-government co-ordination mechanisms or tools used by CoGs for communication in times of crisis**



Note: n CoG = 39; Other includes options such as informal meetings, emails, activity log, WebEx and other messaging platforms such as Viber. n MH = 24; Other includes options such as informal videos, audios, WebEx, Zoom and Skype.

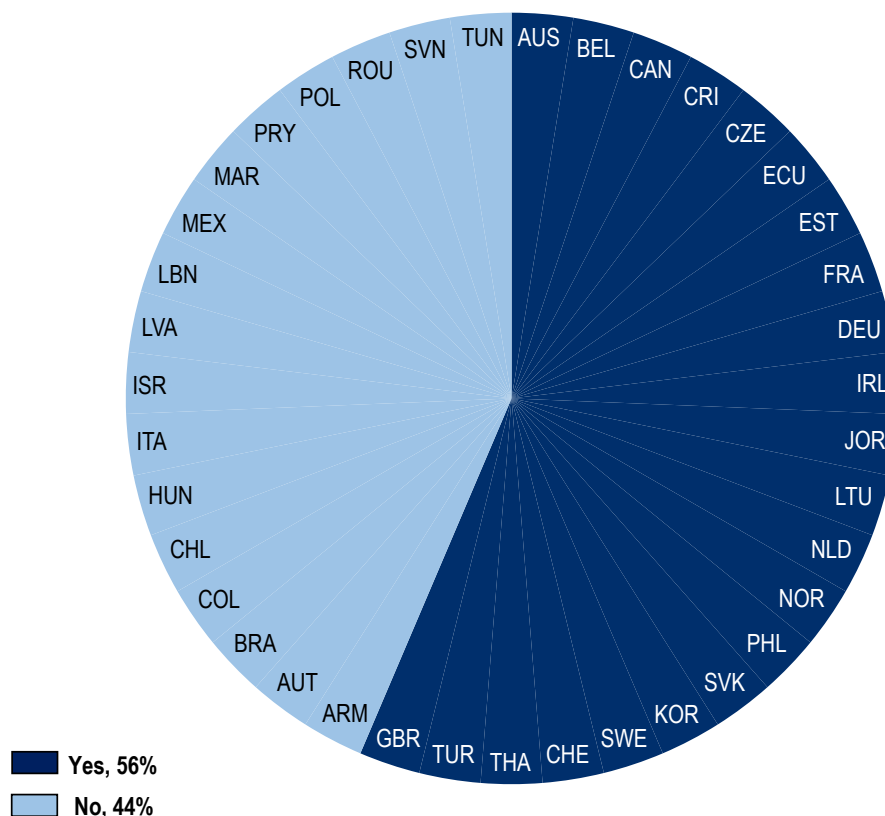
Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

Despite a widespread use of co-ordination tools, 73% of CoGs and 61% of MHs selecting crisis communication as a challenge mentioned co-ordination and the wide range of actors (public institutions, experts, scientists, etc.) involved in preparing messages and analysing their impact as a reason why this competency is complex. Exchanges with officials have also highlighted that protocols and arrangements may sometimes be challenging for a variety of reasons, including due to bureaucratic or hierarchical arrangements, the fact that processes are difficult to implement or adapt to specific situations, that staff lack of knowledge or experience using them, or that communicators lack resources.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond setting structures, defining roles, assigning extra resources and ensuring co-ordination of government messages during emergencies, recovery and evaluation phases were embedded in crisis communication processes in 56% of CoGs surveyed, as shown in Figure 7.14. As such, they ensure the whole crisis policy cycle is covered, including informing cross-government decision makers and stakeholders, monitoring citizens' choices and behaviours after the emergency response, and planning of recovery and rehabilitation or support efforts (OECD, 2016<sub>[27]</sub>).

OECD survey responses highlighted that evaluating crisis communications was conducted on an ad hoc basis by 21 out of 33 CoGs<sup>17</sup>, quarterly or more by 5 CoGs and annually by 4 CoGs. As such, taking into account past evaluations and lessons learned from crisis communication practices, they also help to assess the impact of crisis and risk communication efforts and to incorporate lessons into future communication strategies, criteria, protocols, plans and approaches (OECD, 2016<sub>[27]</sub>).

**Figure 7.14. Countries where crisis communication processes include an evaluation and recovery phase or not**



Note: n CoG = 39. The percentage of OECD countries where crisis communication processes included an evaluation and recovery phase amounted to 64%.

Source: OECD 2020 Survey "Understanding Public Communication".

### ***Ensuring crisis communication is used as a lever of accountability***

Building on the abovementioned components, the ability of governments to communicate transparent and reliable information to their populations is a prerequisite to ensure public officials and institutions are held accountable for their crisis response and recovery management processes. While the OECD survey does not allow to assess how crisis communication contributes to governments' accountability, emerging practices during the COVID-19 pandemic provide insights into addressing this complex issue.

Furthermore, public communicators can support public accountability in such unexpected situations by promoting transparency and access to information, providing access or disseminating specific data of interest to key stakeholders and tailored for them (e.g. contracting documents, health situation figures, vaccination data, etc.), including reusing or encouraging the reuse by third parties of open government data, as this was done in national and subnational governments' communication activities around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, including in Scotland (Box 7.18).

### **Box 7.18. Promoting accountability through communication about health open government data: the case of Scotland**

In Scotland, where the National Health Services (NHS) data portal, the “Daily COVID-19 Cases in Scotland” delivers information structured in two pillars.

The first provides data on number of new daily confirmed cases, negative cases, deaths, and testing by NHS Labs. The second covers new hospital admissions and new intensive care unit admissions for COVID-19 in Scotland, including cumulative totals and population rates at Scotland, NHS Board and Council Area levels. In addition, seven-day positive cases and population rates are also presented by Neighbourhood Area. NHS social media posts and other communication activities have been deployed to use the data and inform the population as well as to promote access and consultation of the datasets.

In addition, a “Public Health Scotland COVID-19 dashboard” is updated on a daily basis with the latest data available and data visualisations on COVID-19 in Scotland. They include positive cases reported to Public Health Scotland by NHS Scotland and the United Kingdom Government Regional Testing laboratories, number of tests carried out, figures on deaths of people with a positive test, number of admissions to hospital and intensive care units and COVID-19 vaccination rates.

Source: <https://www.publichealthscotland.scot/our-areas-of-work/covid-19/covid-19-data-and-intelligence/covid-19-daily-cases-in-scotland-dashboard/overview-of-the-daily-covid-19-data-dashboard/>.

Similarly, OECD member and partner countries’ crisis communication responses have highlighted the crucial role played by such actions to explain to individuals and stakeholders their government’s decisions, including when these were linked to limiting certain freedoms and rights. Indeed, to contain the spread of the virus, governments have had to restrict freedoms such as the freedom of movement or right to peaceful assembly during the COVID-19 pandemic. A vast majority of countries passed emergency legislation to address challenges posed by the crisis, at times restricting freedoms in efforts to curb the spread of the virus, including increasing government surveillance powers and tracking systems.<sup>18</sup> Additional recent reports have confirmed limitations to freedoms in an unprecedented number of countries to respond to the pandemic, with close to 13% of the world population living in 2020 in countries with an “open” or “narrowed” civic space rating<sup>19</sup> – a decline from close to 18% in 2019 (CIVICUS, 2020<sup>[30]</sup>).

As individuals’ perceptions of governments’ actions on such sensitive issues matter to ensure decisions adopted remain legitimate and complied with by the populations, crisis communication is a crucial component to clarify why such measures were adopted, whether they are temporary, and the scope of the restriction(s), as this was the case in Denmark (Box 7.19). However, the relations between public communication governance, structures, and applications during crises and governments’ accountability were not covered in the OECD survey and trends could not be assessed and substantiated based on collected data. Refining these linkages will require additional research to further substantiate their contribution to uphold good governance, and notably accountability and transparency during crises in a more systematic way.



### **Box 7.19. Communicating about temporary limitations to civic freedoms: the example of Denmark**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have faced challenges in striking the right balance between, on the one hand, enacting crisis measures, and on the other hand, protecting and promoting civic space. According to the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ICNL) 146 countries enacted 385 emergency measures from January to September 2020 that at times restricted basic civic freedoms. Among these, 57 countries introduced measures that affect freedom of expression, 147 curtail freedom of assembly and 60 propeel privacy issues.

Nevertheless, some countries, such as Denmark communicated clearly on measures required to address the pandemic to counteract these effects. For example, following discussions in Parliament in March 2020, the Government exempted gathering restrictions on “opinion-shaping assemblies” such as protests and political meetings as part of COVID-19 measures. Through the communication of these amendments, the Government re-assured citizens of the protection of this right while encouraging social distancing and respect for safety measures.

Source: Page and Ognenovska (2021<sup>[31]</sup>), “Can civil society survive COVID-19?”, published online on the OECD DAC online blog, available at <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2021/01/13/can-civil-society-survive-covid-19/>; [https://www.ft.dk/ripdf/samling/20191/lovforslag/1158/20191\\_1158\\_som\\_vedtaget.pdf](https://www.ft.dk/ripdf/samling/20191/lovforslag/1158/20191_1158_som_vedtaget.pdf); ICNL/ECNL (n.d.<sup>[32]</sup>), “COVID-19 Civic Freedom Tracker: Keep Civic Space Healthy”, International Center for Not-for-Profit Law/European Center for Not-for-Profit Law, <https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/> (accessed on 13 May 2021).

### ***Ensuring crisis communication is used as a lever of stakeholder participation***

Encouraging collaborative approaches to communicating during crises helps co-create more targeted messages that reach their audiences more effectively and create buy-in and trust, which are essential for the implementation of emergency measures. Traditional crisis communication has often been implemented in a one-way, top-down manner, delivering messages from government to citizens (OECD, 2016<sup>[27]</sup>). However, communicating during a crisis is not only a tool to share information to citizens to ensure their safety, but also represents an opportunity to engage in conversations with a variety of stakeholders and learn from concerns and experiences raised by individuals to shape recovery processes and future policies. The COVID-19 pandemic has made the issue of participation even more relevant, including at the highest political and administrative levels in governments. Policymakers have discussed the repercussions of the virus on wide range of stakeholders. The use of national dialogues in Finland and Germany for example allowed individuals to give feedback, voice concerns and ask questions directly to high-ranking public officials, providing in turn the executive a better understanding of stakeholders’ expectations and situations (Box 7.20).

### Box 7.20. Engaging with and listening to citizens' concerns during COVID-19

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the governments of Finland and Germany directly engaged with citizens regarding the crisis. These dialogues allowed individuals to voice concerns and provided policymakers the chance to better understand the effects of the virus on stakeholders' lives, make financial and aid services known to citizens, as well as respond to feedback. The conversations were widely disseminated and summaries made available on government websites, ensuring all citizens could learn about these events.

#### The Finnish National Dialogues

In March 2020, in response to COVID-19, the Ministry of Finance, the civil society organisation Dialogue Academy and the Timeout Foundation joined forces to launch the Finnish National Dialogues. Their aim was to engage with and listen to citizens on how they were handling the crisis and to understand their needs. The initiative also aimed to include a range of actors in organising these dialogues. Over 80 organisations and actors had come together, including civil society organisations, municipalities, government offices, foundations and individuals.

Between April and June 2020, 162 dialogues took place, with over 1 100 participants actively contributing to these discussions. Ultimately, the goal of these discussions was to increase the mutual understanding of the different participants. Particular attention was given to ensuring inclusion of minorities and vulnerable groups, whose voices might not be as prominent as other demographics. Through this partnership, the government was able to reach a wide range of groups, including prisoners, sex workers, relatives of mental health patients, teachers, social workers, children, the elderly and pensioners. The dialogues were all documented and used to build a comprehensive overview, which was published on the Ministry of Finance's website.

#### 'Die Bundeskanzlerin im Gespräch': the chancellor in conversation in Germany

The Citizens' Dialogues organised by the German Federal Chancellery offered opportunities for informed conversations between public officials and citizens on the impact of the virus. Individuals could put forward questions directly to the chancellor. These conversations brought together professional communities such as individuals engaged in volunteering, the cultural sector, helpline staff, and students in seven events as of the beginning of September 2021. Additionally, people living in regional communities and specific demographic groups, such as families with children, were also given the opportunity to participate.

These dialogues aimed at keeping the chancellor "as close to citizens as possible". These opportunities for direct interaction allowed the chancellor to respond to concerns as well as make services and financial aid known to citizens. For example, responding to discussions involving individuals from the cultural sector, the chancellor provided reassurance that pandemic assistance would continue into the autumn as well as *vis à vis* the vaccination efforts. In addition to being broadcasted on official websites, these conversations were also broadcasted on Facebook and summaries were made widely available.

Source: [https://avoinhallinto.fi/assets/files/2020/11/Policy\\_Brief\\_1\\_2020.pdf](https://avoinhallinto.fi/assets/files/2020/11/Policy_Brief_1_2020.pdf); <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/citizens-dialogue-voluntary-work-1916384>; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/news/preserving-the-future-of-culture-1898578>; <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/citizens-dialogue-volunteering-1918870>; <https://www.facebook.com/Bundesregierung/videos/die-bundeskanzlerin-im-gespr%C3%A4ch-ehrenamt-in-der-pandemie/223218509283310/>.

In light of the potential for crisis communications to feed into broader communication and governance objectives, some countries have recently started to co-develop crisis communication activities—notably in

the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Such initiatives contribute to not only a more integrated approach to crisis communication (OECD, 2016<sup>[27]</sup>) but also dialogue between actors involved, such as public authorities, international organisations, civil society organisations, the media, scientists, businesses, and stakeholders at the local and national levels. This was the rationale, for example, in Slovenia, where a call centre developed to provide information about the pandemic was also used as a platform for a two-way conversation between the government and the population, as described in Box 7.21.

### **Box 7.21. Using a COVID-19 call centre as a two-way crisis communication system in Slovenia**

In Slovenia, the call centre operated by the Government provides the public with reliable and up-to-date information on the coronavirus at a toll-free telephone number. Calls are answered by medical students of the University of Ljubljana.

The Centre not only provides information about the virus and measures to stop its spread, it has also been used as a means for people to express their fears and worries while talking to someone knowledgeable, trustworthy and understanding. As such, it has acted as a two-way information delivery system, allowing the government to inform citizens about health and safety and citizens to convey their concerns to the government.

Given the proportion of Slovenians who live in rural areas and/or do not have access to digital tools, the call centre also made it possible to establish a dialogue with difficult-to-reach segments of the population.

Source: Interview with Kristina Plavšak Krajnc, Senior Advisor, Office for EU and International Cooperation, Ministry of Culture, Government of the Republic of Slovenia, 2020.

Digital communication facilitates the shift from information sharing to meaningful engagement, and public communicators selected crisis management as the top objective pursued through digital-led activities. Recent crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have also required that governments find new and innovative ways to reach all parts of the population (see Chapter 5).

Governments can use this potential not only directly with social media followers or website visitors but also through engaging with intermediaries as two-way relays of information and feedback. By working with influencers, community leaders, and many more, public communicators can help co-construct messages and channel information from government to citizens as well as the other way around, online and offline, as seen in the Government of Canada's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Box 7.22). Such initiatives have helped ensure all groups in society were effectively reached and engaged through means and languages that they use, including publics that are less easily reached by governments, more vulnerable or isolated. They also resulted in lessons learned for government communication processes on how to co-create messages and better engage all parts of society.

**Box 7.22. Relying on influencers or community leaders as intermediaries for dialogue between the government and citizens in Canada**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Canada developed new ways of engaging with influencers, opinion leaders and community representatives to better understand the concerns and expectations of specific demographic groups and minorities and co-create targeted and tailored messages. Confronted with challenging times, these new approaches responded to evidence and feedback pointing to the need to adapt communications for groups that are difficult to reach or have less trust in government messages but needed to be rapidly and efficiently addressed during the crisis.

Beyond translating resources and developing ads about the government's COVID-19 response in different languages distributed through a variety of channels, the government strengthened relationships with leaders of minority groups or communities. For example, they co-developed national and regional communication campaigns with indigenous leaders and equipped them with the necessary skills and information to respond to concerns and expectations and give feedback to the government. Evidence from these COVID-19 initiatives includes that co-creation approaches result in culturally appropriate products and support messages that are more likely to reach and be trusted by all groups, increasing the impact of crisis communications. Building on this experience, the Canadian government plans to further use and institutionalise such development and co-creation processes in future public communication strategies and activities.

Source: Adapted from information shared by the government of Canada.

## Key findings and the way forward

The specific applications of public communication discussed above illustrate the practical ways in which this function can be implemented to meet a range of policy goals. As demonstrated, their use also offers opportunities to support transparency, integrity, accountability and citizen participation in public life, and ultimately contribute to strengthening democratic processes.

- Campaigns are one of the most ubiquitous and effective instruments of communication to raise awareness of – and compliance with – government policies, as well as to promote the uptake of services. Emerging practices highlight the opportunity to expand the use of campaigns to foster a more open government, for instance by encouraging greater stakeholder participation and supporting the implementation of policy objectives such as strengthening a culture of integrity within society and the public sector. Further research into the risks of poorly run campaigns and criteria for impactful and innovative campaigns could further highlight means to make a more strategic use of this communication competency.
- Media relations, as the oldest and most established area of communications, is widely used to provide information and promote government priorities. However, its potential for improving transparency is under-exploited. Engagement with the media is mostly conducted through formalised means such as press releases and conferences. Further research would be needed to document the potential of digital tools to complement these avenues and open spaces for dialogue between public communicators and journalists can further be leveraged. Furthermore, while acknowledging a delicate balance is to be safeguarded between engagement with the media and potential attempts at shaping or pressuring the media environment, encouraging more constructive relationships with the media can greatly support democratic dynamics, by amplifying stakeholder voices that public communicators can in turn use to inform their work. This can be done by maintaining regular conversations with a variety of media outlets on issues beyond high-profile news stories, for instance by partnering with them to amplify opportunities for citizen participation. Going forward, research into guidelines, charters, or principles developed by countries to inform their relations with the media could shed light on how to create meaningful engagement and enable the media to play a watchdog role and support democratic processes.
- Internal communication appears to be an under-prioritised competency that suffers from constrained resources, limited guidance and co-ordination challenges. Nonetheless, it plays a central role in creating a more effective public sector by creating alignment with, and buy-in for, governmental priorities. While internal audience insights and the analysis of specific internal communication campaigns were outside of the scope of the OECD surveys, future research on these topics could help build a better understanding of their impact.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of crisis communication, while underlining numerous limitations. While the OECD surveys cover the year preceding the pandemic (2019), and while this report does not aim to assess government's communication efforts during the crisis, the survey findings shed some light onto this crucial government function. Having defined and clear structures, responsibilities and protocols that can be easily adaptable are essential to ensure preparedness and to speak with a coherent voice during such unexpected circumstances. Evidence points to the possibility of reforming this competency to render it more evidence-driven, co-ordinated and collaborative. This is particularly urgent if crises require steering a whole-of-society response, as in the case of the recent pandemic. Future-proofing crisis communication and increasing preparedness will require learning from thorough evaluation of crisis communication and its impact. External scrutiny by stakeholders would benefit such exercises and ensure greater accountability in crisis response and management. Considering the monitoring and evaluation of crisis communication was not extensively covered by the OECD surveys, going forward, further research on this area could yield valuable insights. Studying in more depth how, where and when

public communication innovated, succeeded and failed during the COVID-19 crisis could also be needed to deepen these analyses. Moreover, refining the understanding of co-ordination mechanisms would require additional discussions and follow up with countries, which the scope of these OECD surveys did not allow for.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Austria and Romania did not provide data for this question.

<sup>2</sup> Romania did not provide data for this question

<sup>3</sup> Japan did not provide data for this question.

<sup>4</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/2021-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-vaccine-against-disinformation-blocked-more-130-countries>.

<sup>5</sup> For more details on engagement with social media specifically, please see chapter 5 of this Report.

<sup>6</sup> Definition provided in the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication”.

<sup>7</sup> Refers to “Linee guida per l’elaborazione dei programme di comunicazione delle pubbliche amministrazioni” issued by the Undersecretary to the information and publishing in November 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Definition provided in the OECD 2020 Survey “Understanding Public Communication”.

<sup>9</sup> Romania did not provide a response to this question.



<sup>10</sup> Following the completion of the survey and its data cleaning phase, the OECD collected these insights from public officials and communicators in the framework of data validation workshops held between September and November 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Lebanon did not provide a response to this question. Among MHs, a similar proportion of respondents (16 out of 23 MHs, 65%) relies on criteria, standard procedures or protocols to respond to crisis. Among them, a majority pointed to national central frameworks or guidelines. The other 7 ministries pointed to responses depending on the situation. The Lithuanian MH did not provide an answer.

<sup>12</sup> Following the completion of the survey and its data cleaning phase, the OECD collected these insights from public officials and communicators in the framework of data validation workshops held between September and November 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Monitoring is understood as watching and checking a situation carefully for a period of time. Handling is understood as dealing with, having responsibility for, or being in charge of responding to media and social media requests and questions (adapted from Cambridge Dictionary).

<sup>14</sup> Austria did not provide a response to this question.

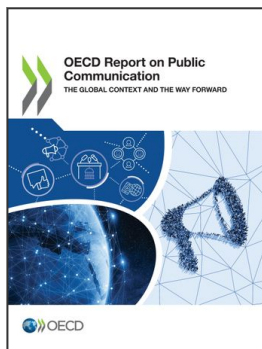
<sup>15</sup> Slovenia responded not having cross-government co-ordination mechanisms for crisis communication.

<sup>16</sup> Following the completion of the survey and its data cleaning phase, the OECD collected these insights from public officials and communicators in the framework of data validation workshops held between September and November 2020.

<sup>17</sup> This calculation only takes into account the 33 countries who evaluate communication activities.

<sup>18</sup> Data shared by Mr. Mark Malloch-Brown in an OECD Observatory of Civic Space Webinar on “The Impact of National and Global Security Measures on Civic Space”, 15 July 2021.

<sup>19</sup> The Civicus Monitor uses 5 categories : “open”, “narrowed”, “closed”, “repressed” and “obstructed” to assess and cluster how civic freedoms apply in 196 countries.



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