

# Executive summary

## Redefining the role of public communication in an evolving information ecosystem

Public communicators are facing an increasingly complex information environment brought about by rapid technological changes, which have provided both novel opportunities and unprecedented challenges. These evolutions have connected individuals around the world, facilitated their ability to create and share information, and helped social movements broaden their reach. At the same time, online and social media platforms are undermining the role of traditional media and have facilitated the unparalleled speed and scale of the spread of mis- and disinformation in ways that undermine trust, public discussion and democratic engagement.

This report highlights pioneering government efforts to use public communication more effectively, as an instrument of policy making, service design and delivery, and democracy itself. For the purposes of this report, public communication, as distinct from political communication that is linked to elections or political parties, is understood as the government function to deliver information, listen and respond to citizens in the service of the common good. This publication therefore provides evidence and examples of how communication can be used to greater effect in improving policies and services, promoting a two-way dialogue with citizens, and strengthening transparency, integrity and accountability. It demonstrates how governance arrangements, institutional structures, and professionalisation can help the communications function go beyond the provision of information and fulfil its potential to help strengthen democracy and trust in government.

## Governance of public communication

The report starts by exploring the diverse range of organisational structures for public communication across the surveyed countries and provides insights into how centres of government (CoGs) can better support the function across government. It is important to provide clear mandates and guidelines that set a strategic role for this function within government and that shield it from politicisation. While developing clear strategies can strengthen impact, improve co-ordination and help ensure communication supports policy goals, only just over half of respondents have done so. Furthermore, 76% of CoGs and 82% of Ministries of Health (MHs) noted that human and financial resources are a key challenge. Finally, less than half of communicators in CoGs interact frequently with policy teams. Such trends flag the need to further invest in and support the professionalisation of this function.

## Evidence-based and data-driven public communication

Public communication needs to be informed by evidence, including audience and behavioural insights (BI), for it to resonate with intended stakeholders and have an impact. Such evidence helps ensure messages are tailored to all segments of society, notably underrepresented or disengaged groups. As many as 26%

of CoGs surveyed do not target any specific audience groups in their communication. Using BI across the communication cycle can also help ensure biases are identified and addressed, rendering communication more effective.

## **Evaluating public communication**

While data suggest that countries widely recognise the importance of evaluating public communication, they also show the limited integration of evaluation within strategic planning processes, the lack of institutionalised methodologies and a focus on outputs over impact. For example, only 42% of CoG respondents analysed changes in service uptake, while even fewer evaluated changes in participation levels following a communication activity (16%). Conducting more systematic evaluations will be crucial in demonstrating the added-value of communications and justifying a greater investment in this function. Anchoring evaluations in an end-user perspective and including trusted voices outside of government can help improve their relevance and transparency.

## **Communicating in an evolving and fast-paced digital age**

While almost all respondents have consolidated an online presence and have established dedicated digital communication units, there is untapped potential to promote more engagement through the use of technologies. A more consistent “digital by design” approach can help governments move the conversations where stakeholders are, and ensure digital communication is more citizen-centric. Accompanying the adoption of digital technologies and data with considerations on their ethical use as well as the pursuit of inclusion and engagement will be crucial.

## **Public communication responses to the challenges of mis- and disinformation**

The report also looks at how governments can use communications to counter the spread of mis- and disinformation. Notably, only 38% of CoG respondents had developed guidance related to these topics, indicating that governments may be inadequately prepared for the magnitude of the challenge. Moreover, given that communication does not happen in a vacuum, developing a holistic approach, including legislative and regulatory responses, would help build resilience to harmful and misleading content. Such an approach would need to promote diverse, independent and quality media; support media and digital literacy; consider transparency requirements and issues related to the business models of social media platforms; and explore other efforts to strengthen the information ecosystem.

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

Finally, the report provides illustrative examples related to the use of campaigns, media relations, internal and crisis communication and their contribution to policy implementation, service delivery, and open government principles.

The continuously changing information ecosystem in which governments communicate will require a shift in mindset as well as crucial reforms and investments to enable more strategic communication that can promote better policies and reinforce democracy. This report is a starting point and an international benchmark providing communicators and decision makers with the evidence and good practices to support this transition.



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