Communication with Social Actors on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Future Crises

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The COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, tumultuous geopolitical affairs, and widening inequities are reshaping public policies, diplomatic postures, and the global economy. Even the public is experiencing disenchantment, and their trust in established institutions shows signs of erosion. Now more than ever, Governments and public institutions need to re-evaluate their relationships with other social actors to coalesce action to achieve the Goals embodied in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The time is ripe to strengthen the social contract that underpins a social dynamic that is both intricate and delicate.

To navigate these uncharted waters, Governments need to focus on regaining and sustaining public trust in order to strengthen and preserve the legitimacy of public institutions. A key driver of that trust is communication that reflects a high degree of intentionality. The pandemic ushered in innovations in how information is shared; there is now a stronger emphasis on transparent, inclusive and purposeful communication.

Employing effective communication strategies becomes vitally important during prolonged crises, which can be characterized by urgency and unpredictability, a high degree of newsworthiness, and the capacity to change certain aspects of human behaviour. Typically, all of these descriptors apply to disease outbreaks of epidemic or pandemic potential. First, such outbreaks are, by nature, urgent and require rapid decision-making, treatment and prevention response, and prompt follow-through by health professionals and the general population. However, this is made difficult by the second characteristic of outbreaks: they are highly unpredictable. As witnessed during the recent pandemic, there can be sudden surges in cases due to (even minor) lapses in infection control, mutations in the pathogen, or increased exposure through shifts in travel patterns or contact protocols. Third, outbreaks such as COVID-19 are alarming and create significant anxiety within the public sphere. This anxiety can prompt people to behave in highly irrational and even dangerous ways, including rioting. Outbreaks have the potential to cause considerable social disruption and substantial economic losses, possibly out of proportion to the actual risk. Fourth, as illustrated here, outbreaks cause serious upheavals in society, making them highly newsworthy. Excessive media attention can potentially exacerbate public anxiety and fear, especially if official information is absent or inadequate. Last, given that pathogens are infectious, human behaviour is a key factor in determining the severity of an outbreak. Thus, any information circulated among the public acquires the status of a control intervention.

Shifts in communication: pandemic-era innovations

Over the course of the pandemic, Governments designed risk communication strategies aimed at facilitating and expediting the dissemination of accurate information to everyone virtually everywhere. Tailoring these strategies to the needs of the population helped combat fearmongering, decrease elevated public stress levels, and counter false information. While all countries suffered significant socioeconomic fallout from the pandemic, some experienced early success in controlling the spread of COVID-19 by adopting the types of innovative approaches explored below.[2]

- *State-society synergy*. In Taiwan, Province of China, the Government collaborated extensively with civil society to effectively address COVID-19-triggered uncertainties. Almost from the start, the Government opted to communicate openly, transparently and regularly with the public about dynamic developments. A number of unique strategies were employed to connect with the public; a dog was fielded as the COVID-19 public communications ambassador to increase engagement on social media posts containing public health messages, and the Government engaged civic hackers and professional comedians to help quell misinformation, embracing "humor over rumor".[3]

- *Social marketing and technology innovations*. The Government of the Republic of Korea received high praise for its efficient risk communication techniques, which included the use of social media, text messages, and other technology-based approaches to quickly disseminate information on the pandemic and to offer updates on the most recent developments. The Government utilized these digital tools intelligently to improve crisis communication, organize massive public health initiatives and supply chains, and promote the widespread adoption of preventive measures, including social seclusion and mask use, in collaboration with broadcast and social media entities.

- *Driving scientific communications*. At a time when information about the virus and its risks was scarce, the Government of India enlisted the support of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) to empower the scientific community to take informed action. In addition to stewarding research, ICMR communicated evidence to the general public in real time, participating in high-level daily press briefings,

publishing and disseminating guidelines on testing and face masks, providing consistent communication on social media channels, and increasingly engaging with at-risk communities to emphasize the importance of healthy behaviours. This open communication was instrumental in building the confidence of the population in public health measures—especially masking, testing and vaccination.

- *Localized communications and help from the arts community*. Senegal refined and localized its communication strategies to drive transparent and consistent public messaging. The Government analysed granular data to identify public consumption patterns relating to various channels of communication, including radio, newspapers, and television, and used the findings to guide the dissemination of information at the community level. This approach enabled public health officials to deliver the right information at the right time to the right population to derive the greatest impact.[4] The country's artists also played a role in amplifying the Government's health messages. Graffiti artists created visually compelling murals showing the use of sanitizers, face masks and hand etiquette to reach educationally deprived populations within the country.[5]

The approaches highlighted above reflect the different considerations that influence the success of communication strategies. Among the key factors driving this success are compelling and concise messaging, the selection of appropriate channels of delivery, the expertise of spokespersons, the ability to identify and meet the needs of the audience (and to understand their limitations), strategic timing, constructive interplay between actors (both within and outside the public sector), trust in the Government, the active involvement of the scientific community, a culture of innovation, and strong political motivation. Where such factors are given consideration, Governments are better able to pursue a coordinated approach to public communications—one that is rooted in the local context and honours transparency and harmonization among different actors. It is recognized that withholding, underplaying or concealing vital information from the public contributes to the longevity of global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the ground, countless good Samaritans, aid agencies, non-profit entities and religious institutions pooled their accumulated high trust capital to drive social good during the pandemic. Examples abound of non-governmental actors communicating risks attached to COVID-19 to vulnerable communities. Liaisons between local government and religious leaders had a multiplier effect in elevating the risk readiness of communities. In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement facilitated a whole-of-society response to the pandemic.[6] In other cases, social actors played key roles in health protection without direct collaboration with the Government. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, faith-based organizations across denominations sensitized and mobilized communities to adopt public health measures. Religious leaders integrated anti-COVID-19 messages into their services and encouraged their faith communities to adopt measures decreed by the national Government.[7]

Future-proofing communications: actions to take

The innovations highlighted above illustrate the need for Governments to be smarter and sharper in the way they develop and implement public communications strategies. Experience from past health emergencies, including the 2003 SARS outbreak, the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, the 2014 Ebola outbreak, and the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic, has shown that the failure to provide accurate and timely information can have a devastating impact—even on the most well-resourced countries. Misinformation and rumours mushroom in disordered information environments, further burdening fragile health-care systems. Some of the key lessons learned from past outbreaks are elaborated below, as they can help Governments identify and address potential shortfalls that impede effective communication.

- *Consistent messaging across key stakeholders is critical*. In times of crisis, owing to the involvement of multiple authorities, messages run the risk of becoming unclear and even contradictory due to conflicting institutional perspectives and priorities. Mixed with heightened public emotions during crises, inconsistent messaging often results in panic and hinders adherence to crisis mitigation measures. Ideally, though circumstances may differ depending on the nature of the crisis, one authority should assume the lead early on and exercise convening powers. The Government of Australia addressed the extraordinary circumstances by forming a national cabinet made up of the Prime Minister and all state and territory first ministers to coordinate the response to COVID-19 in the country.[8] This aided in streamlining internal communications across different departments, levels (national, subnational and local government), and other stakeholders (including technical bodies and experts) and ensured that the key messages were clear, concise and consistent.

- *Reliable spokespersons positively shape outcomes*. A person or institution that possesses the requisite knowledge, recognizes the gravity of the situation, provides accurate information, is articulate and transparent, and takes accountability can be considered an exemplary crisis communicator. In demanding times,

heads of State must address the public consistently and empathetically to generate public trust in emergency response and increase compliance. In New Zealand, former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern proved the efficacy of this approach by building a strong rapport with her people. Technical experts can help demystify the science behind the crisis for audiences, as demonstrated by the work of Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, COVID-19 Health Operations and Technical Lead for the World Health Organization.

- *Utilizing a combination of traditional and modern media tools in developing and implementing risk communication strategies is essential*. Institutions that fail to evaluate their information dissemination strategies and adapt to emerging realities find it hard to gauge or achieve success in their communication campaigns. Given the rapidly changing nature of information consumption, the integration of new media tools is becoming increasingly important in information delivery. However, newer media must supplement and not replace traditional channels of communication. Governments need to craft comprehensive information dissemination strategies that incorporate the use of differentiated channels to reach diverse audiences (including older persons, youth and Indigenous Peoples). It is important to strengthen the capacity of technical experts in using social and digital media to ensure the effective real-time dispatch of critical information. Investing the necessary resources in improving traditional channels, especially those offering information in local languages, is equally essential to ensure that no one is left behind.

- *Communications preparedness needs to start ahead of a crisis*. Communication activities become unsustainable in the absence of a solid foundational infrastructure. Governments must lay the groundwork for suitable communication mechanisms well in advance. When a crisis hits, communication systems and protocols must already be in place to allow for immediate activation. At an institutional level, investments are needed to develop resources that work not only for crisis management but also for crisis aversion. First, dedicated knowledge resources must be created and routinely updated to train personnel on risk and crisis communications. Second, monitoring tools must be built to identify, track and bust rumours; Mercy Corps in Puerto Rico set an example by launching an innovative and cost-effective rumour tracker tool with the support of community leaders.[9] Third, institutions must proactively conduct outreach to their audience, especially vulnerable and marginalized communities, using multiple channels. Lastly, systems that enable public access to government decisions and rationales (especially those impacting freedoms) must be reactivated, well publicized, and protected through regular oversight.

The COVID-19 experience offered a sobering lesson on the importance of building and maintaining a strong relationship between the Government and society. As the globe straddles the halfway mark of the 2030 Agenda, there is a renewed urgency to resume the pursuit of critical developmental aspirations and recover lost progress. For progress to be made, there needs to be open and transparent dialogue between societal actors and an environment that supports and sustains the conversation. Governments must focus on the silver lining—which may appear somewhat blurred at present—and strive for the resilience and agility that will allow the public sector to deal effectively with future crises. Hopefully, strong and successful communication will contribute to building a safer, healthier and more inclusive world.

Endnotes

1   Torsha Dasgupta is a Senior Associate, Mirza Shadan a Director, and Kaushik Bose a Vice-President at Global Health Strategies.

2   While particular approaches may have worked in certain geographical areas or among specific communities, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. As the success of communication strategies depends heavily on the local context, it is advisable to customize approaches according to the sociodemographic profile of the targeted population(s).

3   Anne Quito, "Taiwan is using humor as a tool against coronavirus hoaxes", *Quartz*, 5 June 2020, available at https://qz.com/1863931/taiwan-is-using-humor-to-quash-coronavirus-fake-news/.

4   Ben Leo and Catherine Winn, "Localized communication plans help Senegal control COVID-19", Brookings Institution, 10 November 2020, available at https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2020/11/10/localized-communication-plans-help-senegal-control-covid-19/.

5   Reuters, "Senegal's graffiti artists join fight against coronavirus" (Dakar), 27 March 2020, available at https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-senegal-graffiti/senegals-graffiti-artists-join-fight-against-coronavirus-idINKBN21E1Q5.

6   Ezekiel Boro and others, "The role and impact of faith-based organisations in the management of and response to COVID-19 in low-resource settings", *Religion and Development*, vol. 1, No. 1 (online publication: 16 June 2022), pp. 132-145, available at https://doi.org/10.30965/27507955-20220008.

7   Sadiki Kangamina and others, "Conflict, epidemic and faith communities: church-state relations during the fight against Covid-19 in north-eastern DR Congo", *Conflict and Health*, vol. 16, article No. 56 (9 November 2022), available at https://doi.org/10.1186/s13031-022-00488-4.

8   Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, "National Cabinet", available at https://federation.gov.au/national-cabinet (accessed on 10 February 2023).

9   World Health Organization, "Rumour Tracker Programme: a community-based approach to address information gaps and misinformation on COVID-19", 22 May 2022, available at https://www.who.int/news-room/feature-stories/detail/scicom-compilation-rumourtracker.