



## 2016 DevCom Annual Meeting Report

### Paris, 9-10 November 2016



### *Highlights and Conclusions*

- Various events in 2016 represent a **wake-up call for the development community**: to restore trust in international development and cooperation, we need to reconnect with citizens, become better listeners and understand what motivates our critics.
- Many institutions use “aid as charity” and “aid to stop migration” narratives in order to provoke emotions and garner short-term public support. However, these **messages do not reflect development today** and risk undermining public support in the longer-term.
- The **private sector has crucial roles to play** in development, in terms of both corporate social responsibility and core business. Communicators need to move beyond the jargon, find messages that can mobilise the private sector and work on new narratives together with the private sector.
- The **SDGs provide communicators with a new mandate for public engagement**. They are “the people’s agenda”. They also include 5 specific targets on development education, awareness-raising and access to information.
- Great progress has been made in **making data more visual, accessible and interactive**. However, communicators need to **combine data with human interest stories** that engage with citizens, local communities and social movements.
- In **2017-2018**, DevCom will focus on the following themes:
  - **2030 Agenda**: integrating the SDGs into communications and public engagement strategies (DevCom Peer Learning Hub).
  - **Public attitudes** and a new “listening architecture”: understanding our constituents and learning what really motivates them.
  - The **mandate for development communications**: why development institutions need to invest in public engagement today.
  - **Innovation & new technologies**: making the most of the digital opportunities for public engagement and awareness-raising.

## 2016: a Challenging Year for Development Communicators

At the end of a long year, the 2016 DevCom Annual Meeting provided a much-needed opportunity for 60 experts from 45 DevCom member and partner organisations to come together, share experiences, reflect on common challenges and consider their strategies.<sup>1</sup>

Their discussions confirmed: these are trying times for development communicators.

- Polls, elections and referenda across the globe have shown that **many citizens have lost trust in globalisation, international cooperation and public institutions**. Yet, sustainable development cannot be achieved without public support.
- Development institutions are grappling with the implications of the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#). The SDGs give development communicators a direct mandate for their work. However, to fulfil this mandate, they need to reach out to **new audiences, adopt new narratives and find new partners**.
- A wave of immigration and a series of terrorist attacks have polarised the public debate in many OECD countries. **Several political leaders have reallocated aid to “stem migration” or “enhance security”**. Messaging on these themes is highly politicised, sensitive and difficult to combine with longer-term development narratives.
- With the erosion of the traditional media industry and the **emergence of social media as a disseminator of “fake news”**, communicators need to find new ways to raise public awareness about “serious” development issues and promote fact-based public debates.

**Available online**  
([oecd.org/dev/devcom](http://oecd.org/dev/devcom))

[Agenda](#)

[Presentations](#)

[List of Participants](#)

## A Wake-Up Call

Participants agreed: the year’s events were a strong wake-up call for the development community. Have development institutions lost touch with citizens? Are their narratives still relevant?

Opening the meeting, **Mario Pezzini** ([OECD Development Centre](#)) provided powerful examples. The development community talks about eradicating poverty, but often forgets where most of the world’s poor people live: in middle income countries. It talks about inclusive growth and “win-win” solutions, but often glosses over unfavourable results and real trade-offs between policies. Communicators, said Mr. Pezzini, need to wake up the development community and break it out of its traditional ways of thinking.

Along these lines, **Eva Bratholm** ([NORAD](#)) argued that communicators who believe in international cooperation ought to be more eager than ever to promote the work they are doing and make the case for global goals and commitments. She shared the positive experience of the [Enlightenment Trail](#) in September, more than 5000 night hikers climbed the Gaustatoppen mountain and visited seventeen SDG light installations. Great footage of the event helped attract broad coverage in traditional media and social media views. 17% of Norwegians noticed the campaign and awareness of the SDGs increased by 8%

<sup>1</sup> A full list of participants is available at <http://www.oecd.org/dev/pgd/devcom-network-annual-meeting-2016.htm>.

## The Changing State of Public Debate on Development (Session I)

[David Hudson and Jennifer VanHeerde Hudson \(University College London\)](#) shared insights into their research on public attitudes, conducted mainly in France, Germany, the UK and the US. Some highlights:

- While it is difficult to convince sceptics that the SDGs are *important*, it is possible to convince them that the goals are *achievable*, particularly by being shown examples of past success.
- In theory, the refugee crisis could be a useful entry point to discuss development with citizens. However, the crisis evokes negative emotions (like fear and uneasiness) in many OECD citizens. It does not lend itself easily to a positive, fact-based discussion about development.
- Development organisations often use “big numbers” to communicate about their expenditure, activities and results. This fulfils important accountability obligations, and myth-busting is important. However, there is no evidence that public support will grow with greater knowledge about facts and figures.
- Moral and emotional arguments for aid still hold a lot of sway among citizens, despite a growing trend among development institutions to talk about the “national interest” for providing aid. Entrenched beliefs and values are much more powerful than facts.
- Audiences trust and relate to field workers as messengers, while inspirational celebrities only work for audiences that are already engaged.
- Acknowledging public concerns about corruption is important: development institutions can build trust by showing that they are addressing corruption and achieving results despite corruption.
- Many opinion polls produce overly optimistic findings about public support for development cooperation. For example, surveys conducted face-to-face often suffer from “social response bias”: people do not want to look ungenerous by sharing a true negative opinion about aid.

[Jörg Faust \(Deval\)](#) shared insights into his research, which found that, in Western Europe, attitudes to aid are aligned with political constituencies: people who identify as “conservative” are more likely to say that aid can be linked with political conditions and military interventions; people who trust the state are more likely to support public aid spending. The emergence of new political movements that challenge the “left-right” paradigm may affect our understanding of public attitudes. Mr. Faust also argued that, rather than only looking at external factors, the development community should examine its own influence on public opinion. Countries that have long delivered and communicated about “aid as charity” may find it more difficult to convince citizens today about the mutual and global benefits of development cooperation.

In the ensuing **discussion**, participants raised some of the following ideas and suggestions:

- As supporters of international cooperation, we need to do more to understand, target and persuade political leaders as key audiences for our work. **One important factor is the interaction between public opinion and political opinion.** Political leaders often base their decisions on assumptions of public opinion rather than actual public opinion.
- If we want a more accurate and useful understanding of public attitudes, then we urgently need to rethink our methodologies for polling, surveys and public attitudes research. DevCom can promote a discussion around this topic.
- We need to consider the long-term repercussions of our communications strategies. What impact will communicating about “the root causes of migration” have on public attitudes if aid does not actually mitigate migration flows? **If we appeal to short-term emotions, how can we build support for long-term development strategies?**
- We also need to move away from “pitiful” imagery and narratives about development and aid – we can build narratives that generate empathy and shared understanding about development issues.
- We need to communicate better about the success of our work, include the success of the MDGs.
- The development community needs to break out of the “aid bubble”: citizens can both support poverty eradication and think that aid is an ineffective means to tackle poverty. We need to engage with critics: **DevCom can promote our understanding of public attitudes by getting the development community’s strongest critics into the room.**

## The Private Sector in Development: New Narratives (Session II)

The SDGs have thrown the spotlight on the private sector. This session focused on how development communicators can communicate *with* and *about* the private sector more effectively.

1. The private sector is an **audience** that we need to engage, both at a corporate level and at the level of individuals: managers, staff and customers are all citizens that need to be mobilised into action.
2. If the private sector is part of the **story** of sustainable development, then we need to update our knowledge and narratives.
3. Businesses are formidable communicators. We need to **partner** with them to broaden our reach.

**Natalie Jaubert** (BNP Paribas) underlined the challenge of raising awareness about sustainable development among executives who may be concerned about their bank's reputation, but whose primary concern is generating financial returns. BNP Paribas has developed key performance indicators to measure the share of financing to companies with a direct impact on the SDGs. SDG performance will be assessed every year, and will be used to calculate the variable remuneration of top-level executives. In terms of communication with private clients, BNP does not see a demand for "SDG investment products" per se, but does see growing demand for products focused on themes like water or smart food, which are closely linked to the SDGs.

**Helene Toury (Veolia)** provided an overview of Veolia's 3 commitments and 6 priority actions for sustainable development. She described campaigns that Veolia has partnered on in Gabon, Niger and Morocco, raising public awareness about clean drinking water, water wastage and general environmental protection. She also highlighted Veolia's role in incubating start-ups that could make meaningful contributions to the SDGs at local level.

**Raúl de Mora Jimenez (SDG Fund)** shared the Fund's experience in setting up a "listening infrastructure" and **Private Sector Advisory Group** to better understand business perspectives at both global and local levels. He argued that development institutions need to frame narratives *together with* the private sector, and to prioritise the language of "sustainability" over "aid". The Fund's **research** sheds light on the efforts of businesses already working on the SDGs, including not just major global corporations, but also small and medium-sized enterprises. The challenge is to show that the SDGs need to be priorities for core business, not just for corporate social responsibility.

**Ursula Heinrich** (Austrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs) discussed Austria's business partnerships for development, explaining how a dedicated team at the Austrian Development Agency had increased its reach with the private sector by funding feasibility studies, designing stronger messages on the business case for investing in development, and targeting specific business sectors (e.g. in sector-specific magazines). **The Mitmachen ("get active") campaign** and a social entrepreneurship challenge have encouraged very small businesses and start-ups to engage in development projects.

In a series of **small-group exercises**, participants shared their diverse experiences in engaging with the private sector, highlighting opportunities (e.g. creativity & innovation; local knowledge; energy & funding; broader audiences; new technologies; social entrepreneurship; marketing capacity; fresh narratives) and challenges (e.g. trust-building, conflicts of interest & incentives; accountability; scalability & sustainability of partnerships; risk management).

Groups were also asked to perform a tricky **assignment**: to draft a short television statement for a Minister about public-private collaboration in the midst of a corruption scandal (see Annex). Their answers revealed valuable lessons for communicators:

- Acknowledge and denounce corruption – don't ignore scandals. Talk about measures you are taking to address specific cases of corruption, and corruption issues more generally.
- Remind your audience of the important goals of your programme, and explain that the scandal will not affect your determination or capacity to achieve them.
- Address scepticism about multi-stakeholder initiatives by (a) highlighting important private sector contributions to development; and (b) showing how accountable partnerships can encourage businesses to adopt better behaviours.

## Harnessing the Power of Entertainment Education (Session III)

Introducing the afternoon sessions, France's Ambassador to the OECD and Chair of the Development Centre, **Pierre Duquesne** stressed the importance of understanding the public debate on development, mobilising citizens and changing public attitudes. He applauded DevCom for bringing in perspectives and ideas from a growing range of stakeholders, including non-OECD countries like India.

[Poonam Muttreja \(Population Foundation of India\)](#) shared lessons from the Population Foundation of India's venture into entertainment education. Over two seasons and 131 episodes on national television, the Bollywood-directed soap opera "[I, A Woman, Can Achieve Anything](#)" has attracted 115 million viewers and 1.79 million digital engagements. The programme seeks to address entrenched social norms and promote women's empowerment by directly changing narratives in the health sector, communities and families. The idea is to amplify and dramatize solutions that communities across India have already developed rather than imposing external ones.

To promote the programme and ensure that it reaches the most marginalised communities, PFI has partnered with the government in sending out text messages and making films that can be used by educators across the country. Reaching young people via social media is a specific goal for season 3. A social media helps track results, with viewers invited to share stories on how their behaviour has changed.

## Sharing Early Experiences & Lessons on SDG Communications (Session IV)

**Felix Zimmermann** (OECD Development Centre) presented the DevCom Secretariat's proposal to establish a *Peer Learning Hub for SDG Communicators*.<sup>2</sup> This hub has three goals:

1. To provide communicators with a **framework and principles** to help them approach the SDGs and decide on priorities for public engagement.
2. To help SDG communicators **learn from peers** by identifying good practices, innovation, lessons and challenges as they emerge.
3. To ensure that communicators have access to the **resources, tools and advice** being developed in the UN system, the OECD, the European Commission and elsewhere.

Mr. Zimmermann argued that the SDGs provide development institutions with a strong formal mandate to engage with citizens. The SDGs are not only "the people's agenda"; they also include five specific targets on development education, awareness-raising and access to information. To fulfil this mandate, communicators will need to craft new narratives, find new ways to understand and mobilise audiences, and forge new whole-of-government and whole-of-society partnerships. They will also need to innovate with new technologies and find ways to deal with growing budget pressures.

[Caroline Petit \(UN Regional Information Centre in Brussels\)](#) provided an overview of UN-wide efforts to make the SDGs better known. UN DESA has set a target of raising SDG awareness among 2 billion people by 2030! A partnership with [Project Everyone](#) has already helped reach millions of people and create an SDG brand – a set of icons translated into 60 languages. An SDG Action Campaign office is being set up in Bonn. Governments have begun reporting on national SDG progress to the UN High Level Political Forum, while many businesses have begun integrating the SDGs into their strategies and reporting procedures.

Ms. Petit encouraged DevCom members to use SDG materials developed by the UN, including the SDG icons, the UN "digital ambassador" Elyx, 360-degree films, success stories and background materials. The **DevCom Secretariat and UN Regional Information Centre in Brussels will collaborate closely to promote information-sharing and peer learning among DevCom members and UN institutions.**

**Adi Misty-Frost (Civicus)** provided a civil-society perspective on the 2030 Agenda, citing the example of Action for Sustainable Development, a growing global platform bringing together more than 800 organisations from 110 countries. While welcoming global movements, he stressed that the main focus needs to be on local action and contexts: **the SDGs are only important insofar as they connect with people and communities, and respond to their real concerns**, for example about social justice and inequality.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ahead of the Annual Meeting, the DevCom Secretariat shared a Discussion Note: *Towards a DevCom Peer Learning Hub for SDG Communicators*.

Mr. Misty Frost highlighted two major opportunities brought about by the SDGs. First, they help strengthen the voice of marginalised communities. As part of the [Leave No One Behind](#) partnerships, Civicus is helping communities in more than 30 countries prioritise goals, take action and access funding. Second, they can improve accountability by **empowering citizens as SDG data owners and knowledge producers**. Civicus' [Datashift](#) initiative helps civil society organisations (CSOs) collect and analyse data in order to fill SDG data gaps, monitor governments and inform local campaigns.

He underlined the willingness of CSOs to collaborate on the SDGs, but pointed out that **civic space is often constrained and prevents CSOs from holding governments and the private sector to account**.

[Perrine Bouhana \(GlobeScan\)](#) presented findings from the 2016 GlobeScan Radar. People are more familiar with the SDGs in 2016 than they were with the Millennium Development Goals in 2007 (based on data from 13 countries). 28 per cent of people claim to have heard about the SDGs, and SDG awareness appears to be highest in emerging economies. Indeed, **people in non-OECD countries are far more likely to consider themselves global citizens** (56%) than people in OECD countries (42%).

Ms. Bouhana shared two recommendations for public engagement on the SDGs. First, engage with and through partners that enjoy high trust capital: science and academic institutions or CSOs. Second, build economic concerns and employment into the SDG discourse and narrative, since these are top concerns in most countries. In closing, Ms. Bouhana strongly recommended that we improve our listening skills, using polls to understand citizens rather than just predict behaviour.

### Demonstrating Progress: Innovative Approaches for the SDGs (Session V)

[Guido Schmidt-Traub \(UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network\)](#) presented the [SDG Index and Dashboards](#), an initiative that aims to promote the SDGs as shared tools, catalyse policy discussions on progress and fill data gaps. The SDG Index gives 149 countries both an overall index score for the SDGs and specific scores for each SDG. Efforts are underway to broaden the set of indicators, expand country coverage and facilitate regional comparisons. In 2017, a Report will focus on cross-country effects: how can one country's actions and policies help or hinder progress in other countries.

[Desmond Spruijt \(Mapping Worlds\)](#) shared examples of tools for presenting data. UNESCO's e-Atlas for Education 2030 helps visualise all available data to monitor SDG 4, showing where progress is being made and where data is still missing. Map tanker takes a more selective approach, choosing specific indicators that are well-suited for classroom education. The zipParis seeks to combine interactive data with human interest stories that can help connect with diverse audiences.

In the ensuing **discussions**, the following messages stood out:

- Many DevCom members have embraced the SDGs, but not all of them feel they have a political mandate to forge ahead with national SDG communications. Yet, the **SDGs need to be embraced as national goals, an agreement between governments and citizens, not just a UN process**.
- The SDGs are "everyone's goals", designed to make people feel part of a bigger thing. Yet, the principle of universality is not yet taking hold in OECD countries. Reports to the UN High-Level Political Forum suggest that they mainly see the SDGs as goals for developing countries. There are structural issues: development institutions are by nature focused on what occurs in developing countries and, for many, **coordination with other ministries is a new challenge**.
- Communicators face major resources and capacity constraints. The SDGs can be an overwhelming agenda for communicators, in terms of both their complexity and the number of issues they cover.
- Participants invited DevCom to examine how communicators can "break out of the bubble" and go beyond "preaching to the converted". Can communicators **make new cases for international cooperation**? Can they tell powerful, positive stories that engage with local communities and social movements? If opinion surveys show that *knowledge of* the SDGs does not translate into *support for* the SDGs, then what should our messages be?

## Closing Reflections

**Milko Van Gool** (European Commission) stressed that there has never been a greater need to justify what we are doing. International solidarity and charity were great drivers of the MDGs, and communicators in the past might have been concerned about promotion and where to get t-shirts printed. By contrast, the **SDGs will be driven by notions of mutual benefit, moving from aid into “investment mode”**, and communicators need to grapple with messaging around partnerships and global politics.

Mr. Van Gool welcomed DevCom work on how the SDGs change the game, underlining the need to become better at listening, demonstrating results and working in partnership across government and with other stakeholders. The European Commission had drawn similar lessons from the European Year for Development. He proposed that communicating on themes and telling stories from the field would make development work more relatable and people-centred. By contrast, citizens are often put off by large numbers and “talking heads”. This would require a major “communications reflex” in organisations that are traditionally judged by financial results and contract management.

**Bathylle Missika** (OECD Development Centre) thanked participants for a powerful exchange, reminding development institutions that we need to “wake up”, understand local and national conversations and relate to people again. This means becoming savvier about what people think and know, and about what message can mobilise and engage them in positive ways.

She stressed that DevCom could support its members by:

- Strengthening their **collective voice** and advocating for communicators;
- Improving our collective **understanding of audiences**;
- Helping develop **collective messages** that can be adapted to local contexts; and
- Continuing to promote **dialogue and peer learning** as it had done for almost 30 years.

## Next steps

Discussions provided a strong starting point for the members-only DevCom meeting on 10 November. At this meeting, members shared insights into their recent achievements and ongoing challenges, and identified opportunities to improve the impact of development communications. They also discussed priorities for DevCom in 2017-2018.

Their views will be reflected in a revised version of the **2017-2018 DevCom work programme**.

## ANNEX:

# Group Assignment on Public-Private Engagement

10-15 minutes

1. Imagine the following scenario:

Your Minister walks into your office without knocking. She has just been invited to join the nation's most popular weekly TV debate. She needs to leave for the television studio in 15 minutes!

The topic: ***CORPORATIONS: FRIENDS OR FOES IN THE FIGHT AGAINST POVERTY?***

A famous food-industry entrepreneur from your country has just been caught in a major corruption scandal in a developing country. Your Ministry has no links with the scandal, but has recently launched a new multi-stakeholder partnership to improve child nutrition.

The Minister is worried that the scandal will undermine people's trust in the new initiative. She wants to deliver a strong opening statement in the debate, one that both recognises public concerns but builds support for the multi-stakeholder approach.

2. Draft the Minister's 1-minute opening statement