

1st Meeting of the OECD Experts Group on Public Communication (EGPC)

Via zoom, 30 September 2020

Summary notes

Overview

On 30 September 2020, the 1st meeting of the OECD Experts group on public communication gathered more than 130 participants from close to 50 countries, including officials in charge of public communication, members of the OECD Working Party on Open Government (WPOG), as well as representatives from the Open Government Partnership, the European Ombudsman and other international partners. The event allowed a discussion on the preliminary findings of the surveys sent to centres of government (CoG) and ministries of health (MH), which will form the basis of **the International Report on Public Communication**. Discussions also focused on the role of this function in addressing disinformation and various challenges linked to covid-19 as well as what the next activities and deliverables of EGPC can be and the synergies that can be created with the WPOG.

Welcome Remarks

Alex Aiken, Executive Director for Government Communication, United Kingdom, and co-host of this event opened the meeting by stressing that the fight against COVID-19 has been one of the toughest challenges in their field. It required more direct interactions through frequent press conferences, a greater focus on digital content to share preventive measures with a wider audience, and a more data-driven approach through public opinion polls and dashboards. He also stressed the need for a stronger approach to incorporating data and insight into their work. **Katju Holkeri, Head of Governance Policy Unit, Public Governance Department at the Finnish Ministry of Finance, and Chair of the OECD Working Party on Open Government**, underlined the importance of the topic for Open Government principles and that this contribution did not yet receive adequate recognition. She highlighted how it can transform transparency from passive disclosing of information to proactive delivery to a broader audience and its potential to strengthen inclusiveness. She also stressed that communication is a pre-requisite for participation and accountability, thus clearly linking to how this group can support the mandate of the WPOG. **Vincenzo Le Voci, Secretary-General of the Club of Venice** emphasized the need for the appropriate competencies and experiences to adapt working methods quickly, especially given the citizens' growing expectations from their government. He also stressed how strongly crisis communication can impact public opinion, as demonstrated by COVID-19. Finally, **Janos Bertok, Acting Director of the OECD's Public Governance Directorate** stated that public communicators are gatekeepers of information that are essential to democracy and inclusive societies, and that they are operating in an increasingly difficult landscape, particularly with mis- and dis-information proliferating. He stressed the need to gather insights and set together an agenda to help communication improve policies, strengthen the uptake of services, and act as a lever for a more open government. The 1st OECD International Report



on Public Communication to be published in 2021 will be an important milestone in this regard, that can be used by the group for further work in the field.

Presentation of preliminary findings from the OECD public communication surveys

Ahead of the first session, **Michael Nathan, Head of France's Government Information Service** provided a key-note speech focusing on the mandate of communication: making information more impactful; and recreating structures and content to ensure citizens' trust in government. He also stressed the importance of equipping government officials with the appropriate skills and competencies to understand the needs of informing the public in today's changing landscape.

The OECD team then made a presentation of selected preliminary findings from the public surveys¹. These included top challenges selected by countries (respectively crisis, strategies and evaluation), interlinkages with COVID-19 and the state of evaluations (which appears to be done infrequently and in a non-institutionalized manner in most countries). The presentation also outlined how communication could be more fully leveraged as a tool for Open Government reform and as a lever of trust. The first commentator to the presentation, **Erik Den Hoedt, Director, Public Information and Communication Office, Netherlands**, underlined that the focus should be on building, rebuilding, and maintaining trust. He also stressed the need to make a greater use of behavioral insights across government. **Sam Ursich, A/g Assistant Secretary, Communication and Change Branch, People, Communication & Parliamentary Division, Corporate Operations Group, Australian Government Department of Health** provided a health perspective and stressed how research and evaluation, in addition to behavioral insights are key in promoting a more evidence-based and strategic communication. She also underlined the importance of having a dedicated spokesperson during the crisis acting as a trusted voice to counter disinformation, and that communicating to diverse audiences remains challenging. **María Caridad Vela Valencia, Secretary General of Communications, Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador** echoed the importance of inclusiveness and the need to work openly and more directly with citizens and journalists. A discussion followed with all the participants who provided comments and suggestions on the findings shared.

Panel on the role of communication in addressing disinformation linked to COVID-19

The session opened with a presentation by the OECD of the preliminary findings from its survey relating to the institutionalization of counter-disinformation responses within the communication field. The data revealed that a large proportion of responding institutions still lacks adequate structures and frameworks to respond to this challenge. However, some responses highlighted efforts from several governments, a finding also supported by observations in both the [OECD working paper on Governance Responses to Disinformation](#), and the [Covid-19 policy brief Transparency Communication and Trust](#). Indeed, these publications point to the fact that new approaches and practices are emerging and consolidating around the world.

¹ These included 60 survey responses (CoG and MHs) from 45 countries (34 OECD and the European Commission).

Participants highlighted the role the recent “infodemic” played in shifting the understanding of disinformation. The pandemic raised the need for governments to pivot from electoral interference to public health and potentially to other new areas that might arise, while making society more resilient against threats to the information ecosystem. This calls for sound and future-proof structures and for holistic approaches to combating disinformation, such as the Digital Citizen Initiative conducted by Canadian Heritage.

Participants’ experiences with Covid-19 communication similarly entailed speeding up the response to disinformation in parallel with crisis communication. This involves rapid responses based on established protocols, such as the Rapid Response Unit and the RESIST Toolkit in the UK. Reaching specific groups and marginalised communities at risk from exposure to false and misleading information was highlighted as a challenge to a whole-of-society response to Covid-19. The Italian Government leveraged the profile of a vast group of public figures and influencers to amplify the reach and weight of its public health measures, especially with youth. These efforts required close coordination mechanisms for consistent and evidence-based messaging, while the pace of the “infodemic” has often dictated a delicate balance between timeliness and accuracy or completeness of the information disseminated. Building on the discussions, participants called for more collective learning among peers in communication functions around the world to support responses to this issue. They also underlined the need to consolidate evidence on international best practices.

Tour de table on the future of communication

This session allowed participants to share their views on the role of the group and upcoming activities. They called on developing partnerships and cooperation venues between countries, the OECD, the Club of Venice, the South East Europe Communication Network as well as bilaterally. They expressed interest in establishing related principles, collect good practices and conduct country reviews in this area. Members also called for a continuous platform (such as whatsapp or other) to exchange. Finally, digital communication with a focus on social media was chosen as the priority topic for an upcoming webinar.

Closing Remarks

In his closing remarks, **Gerald Mullally, Deputy Director of Communications at the Cabinet Office and Head of the UK Government Communication Service International (GCSI)**, underlined the salience of challenges in the areas of strategy, crisis and evaluation. He stressed how the present shift from communication perceived as an afterthought to a strategic lever of government presents an opportunity to push forward the development of global principles inspired by models of good practice around the world. As for Mr. **Le Voci**, he underlined the need for communicators to work with stakeholders inside and outside government, as they cannot rise up to the challenges by working in a bubble. Major capacity-building investments are also required to cope more efficiently with the increasing evolution of communication techniques and behavioural changes, and to build robust and innovative evaluation methods. Finally, **Alessandro Bellantoni, head of the open government unit, at the OECD’s Public Governance Directorate** thanked the governments of the UK and Korea for their support to the International Report, and stressed the relevance of this collaboration between the two



communities: the WPOG and the EGPC. He also assured participants of the follow up to be conducted on their proposals.

Overall the meeting ended with a call to establish a more strategic approach to public communication and a global profession of communicators that can better support public policies and services, open government principles and citizens' trust. Participants also underlined the importance of this group and its deliverables, the linkages with the WPOG's mandate, and expressed interest and support for increased collaboration, the collection of good practices, as well as the development of related principles in addition to regional and country specific projects and reviews in this area.
