

The Contribution of Government Communication Capacity to Achieving Good Governance Outcomes

The George Washington University's Elliott School for International Affairs
Linder Commons Room, February 19, 2009, 9 am to 4 pm
Rapporteurs' Report

Background

The George Washington University's Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication, School of Media and Public Affairs (SMPA), with the support of The World Bank's Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP), organized a one-day roundtable on the contribution of government communication capacity to achieving good governance outcomes. This undertaking was motivated by the following perspective: Governments have an interest in instituting regimes of transparency and accountability. Providing citizens with adequate information on priorities, programs, and activities ensures the legitimacy of the government and therefore stabilizes the political situation in a country. In contrast, when governments face a crisis of legitimacy, they are vulnerable to disruptive forces and may not be able to effectively carry out their mandates. It is therefore in the interest of governments to communicate effectively about the work they do on behalf of their constituents. As legitimate players in evolving public spheres, governments benefit from developing and maintaining effective communication capacity with citizens, to better take stock of their needs and preferences, and to foster a more deliberative public space for multi-stakeholder participation, informed policy debate, and development effectiveness.

The one-day roundtable consisted of the following three sessions: the communication function of government; success and failure in government communication from around the world; and a brainstorming session on developing and promoting this area of work in international development. Participants included representatives from the U.S. and Belgian governments; media development and journalist organizations (e.g., Center for International Media Assistance of the National Endowment for Democracy; Internews International; and Developing Radio Partners); and World Bank specialists in the areas of public sector governance, development communication, media, and access to information.

Session I: The Communication Functions of Government

Facilitator: Steven Livingston, George Washington University

In this session, participants explored government communication functions and their role in supporting good governance agendas. The following questions informed the discussion:

- Why is communication important in the governance agenda?
- What are the ethical challenges in this area of work? What are the ways in which we might better understand the differences between using government communication capacity for propaganda purposes versus the opening up of participatory and deliberative public spaces?
- What are the roles of ministers of information and finance, and director-level officials with regard to government communication?
- How might we map government communication functions in terms of bureaucratic structures, enabling environments, and larger political cultures?

Summary of discussion

The discussion revolved around the following topics: the functions of government communication; incentives for government communication; the role of ethics in government communication; and the enabling environment for government communication.

- The functions of government communication

There are three primary functions of government communication: informing, advocating/persuading (for policies and reforms), and engaging citizens. Communication represents an important function of government, responsible for improving three principle elements of government: effectiveness (building broad support and legitimacy for programs), responsiveness (knowing citizens needs and responding to them), and accountability (explaining government stewardship and providing mechanisms to hold governments accountable).

Many countries lack a culture of consultation and participation, and this is exacerbated by low literacy rates and lack of information provision. But enhanced citizen participation is a key indicator of effective government communication. Effective public communication efforts enable citizen participation. Therefore, government communication is more than just developing effective spokespeople, it also involves the provision of customer oriented services, and building capacity for citizens to provide government with feedback as regards these services. In developing countries, this requires crafting and promoting good practices when it comes to transparency issues.

It is important to understand that neglecting to provide information to the public represents a serious impediment to governance, and underscoring the benefits of improved government communication has a strong multiplier effect. This point underlies the need to address what incentives governments have to share information (both internally and externally) or be held accountable, and explain how improved communication capacity can deliver those benefits.

External communication (with the media and the public) can have a disciplining impact on policy work and help coordinate communication within governments, because consistent internal information is required to communicate efficiently and effectively with external audiences. In many cases, countries not only lack capacity in communication between government and the public, but also internal communication among government agencies.

- Incentives for government communication

Governments need to be made aware of the incentives for communicating. Governments often don't realize that communication is part of their job and is fundamental to their functioning. In many countries, no budget is provided for continuing communication efforts. Secrecy laws and data that may "look bad" if released to the public impede the willingness to communicate. Political elites and bureaucrats may believe that knowledge is power and that sharing it results in diminished influence. In some countries, governments don't see the need to raise their own capacity because they already own media outlets, such as state-owned radio and newspapers. Weak government communication has clear negative consequences. A former president, toward the end of his term, traveled around the country and learned that citizens did not know about the policy priorities of his administration. Some countries, however, provide the necessary resources to run strong communication operations. For instance, the United Kingdom has around 1000 people at any time working in the government communication area.

Getting political "buy in" from leaders, who may perceive communicating with the public as a risk, requires demonstrating the contribution of government communication to improved governance and development outcomes. For example, a former president once told a participant that if he could repeat his term, the one thing he would improve is communicating with the public. This can be done by highlighting success stories and models in which government communication has improved the effectiveness, responsiveness, and accountability of governments. Communication for educational use may be more attractive to governments than communication that serves to hold them accountable. Finally, governments need to be more aware of the link between accountability and re-election.

- The role of ethics in government communication

Setting up press offices alone will not increase government accountability or citizens' confidence in the government. Government communication has several ethical dimensions, including the following: (1) to provide useful and relevant information to constituents; (2) to listen to citizens and stakeholder groups; (3) to continuously learn from interactions with citizens and stakeholders; (4) to communicate with professionalism; (5) to be truthful (do no harm and do not willingly mislead); and (6) to illuminate issues and add value to public discussion.

Government communication involves not only sending out persuasive messages to the public, but also explaining working policies, creating awareness of the rights of citizens, and developing mechanisms that enable two-way communication between citizens and government. It is a fundamental challenge to make donors and governments understand that government communication is not propaganda. "Information development" may be a more suitable brand to generate support for government communication. There are two sides to information development: First, a culture of disclosure needs to be created; and second, governments need to have relevant information available. That said, every government is involved in propaganda to at least some extent. The challenge is to motivate governments to utilize their communication structures and resources for other kinds of information and to limit propaganda.

- The enabling environment for government communication

Effective government communication requires the creation of an empowered communication environment, in which communication experts are willing to take risks. Well drafted policies that are legally binding and enforceable are crucial factors of an enabling environment. Citizen media literacy and strengthening of media organizations are also necessary. An important way to develop the media is through judicious regulatory reform and well delineated procedures.

The lack of professionalism in government communication in developing countries presents a serious challenge. Government communication entails not only communicating messages, but also requires a firm understanding of the substance of government policies. In this light, much of the work to improve government communication involves addressing structural issues. Leveraging institutions, such as the World Bank, have to recognize that starting points in government communication capacity are different for different countries. By combining its resources with implementers and non-governmental organizations working locally to develop country-specific solutions, the World Bank can build government communication capacity more efficiently.

Session II: Success and Failure in Building Government Communication Capacity

Facilitator: Robin Brown, University of Leeds

In this session, participants delved into the "how" of government communication. Topics included the ways in which governments around the world organize their communication functions, implement consultation and participation mechanisms at both local and national levels, and effectively deploy spokespeople in the public arena. The following questions informed the discussion:

- How do governments around the world and at various levels organize their communication functions?
- What are the mechanisms through which these governments engage in two-way communication with citizens and stakeholder groups?
- How do governments successfully deploy spokespeople in the public arena and what are good practices of effective government spokespeople?

Summary of discussion

The discussion revolved around the following topics: communication capacity in government; government communication capacity and journalistic capacity; the need for 2-way communication between the government and citizens; and building legitimacy and credibility.

- Communication capacity in government

In practice, government communication is more than just a crisis management tool, but rather involves a variety of useful elements, such as consulting for policy-making, achieving consensus, raising awareness, changing behavior, fostering transparency and civic education, as well as listening to/feeling the pulse of society.

In the organizational charts of many governments, there are usually spaces reserved for government communicators, but these roles often remain vacant or understaffed. Governments often lack qualified communication staff, or employ those whose job descriptions include too many tasks that are not communication related, i.e., the actor who is in charge of communication is tasked with many other responsibilities. Spokespeople frequently talk about not being treated fairly by journalists and the media. Moreover, the government spokesperson is often not involved in the communication efforts of government as a whole, lacking a clear job description, pertinent communication training, and necessary information to perform tasks effectively.

Also, communication structures tend to remain decentralized and uncoordinated, even within single government agencies. Across agencies, there is often unevenness in capacity to communicate and a lack of collaboration which results in redundancy. Many governments also lack the requisite infrastructure to communicate, and this needs to be addressed through investment.

It is important to approach improving government communication holistically, taking into account structural issues and “binding constraints”, e.g., lack of incentives and capacity. Government communication capacity can be increased by drawing on traditional systems of communication that are already in place and developing professional associations among spokespeople. Coordination among government departments is also necessary. Methods that are interactive, citizen-based and focus on peer-to-peer learning are important tools in building communication capacity. While there is also very little research on government communication, some basic models in the available literature can be identified across a range of communication capacities

- Government communication capacity and journalistic capacity

It is important to address the lack of journalistic professionalism globally, where journalists are often captives to special interests or corrupted by bribes. In some countries, governments are unwilling to work with the media because they don't trust them to report objectively. Therefore, journalism training is a component of government communication capacity. It is not fair, however, to expect more from media professionals than they are capable of. Governments also need to understand the principles of journalistic work: effective communication relies on independent media to “shape the grayness” of government communication into a “black/white” framework for public consumption.

- Need for 2-way communication between the government and citizens

Two-way communication between the government and the public produces governance outcomes that are of higher quality and more sustainable (many governments do not have sufficient capacity for effective one-way communication). Consulting and engaging the public should not be limited to elections, crises, and politically risky issues. Governments need to be aware that if they don't communicate, opposing forces may dominate the public agenda. Showing citizens that the government is listening may be as important as actually listening. Over the long run, however, citizens need to see that their input is being taken seriously.

Efficiency is an incentive that may serve as motivation for governments to improve their communication capacity. E-government initiatives, such as Web 2.0 technologies and SMS applications, can serve to promote improvements, as can traditional communication tools, such as community radio call-in shows and local television. Community media can stimulate two-way communication between civil society and the state.

- Building legitimacy and credibility

It is important to understand the dynamics of government communication—it is as much about attitude as it is about aptitude. In some cases, governments totally own, manipulate and/or terrorize the media in their country. Commonly, institutional culture plays an important role in shaping a government's approach to communication. The “triangle of distrust” among all parties involved, from NGOs to media to government, calls for innovative approaches to building trust and finding common ground.

Government spokespeople are commonly seen as the mouthpieces of the political party in power, more political instrument than civil servant tasked with the responsibility of providing citizens with information about public programs. In many cases, spokespeople play both roles. In this light, it is important to be clear about the kinds of information spokespeople should convey to the public and to be cognizant of the problematic nature of mingling the roles of a civil servant and politician. They can increase their credibility by communicating about policies and programs, not about politics or political offices. Ironically, credibility is also contingent on perceived access to power, influence, and up-to-date information. Therefore, spokespeople need to build relationships not only with the media, but also with various government agencies.

Session III: Promoting Government Communication Capacity in International Development

Facilitator: Sina Odugbemi, Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP), The World Bank

In this session, participants explored approaches for supporting and mainstreaming work on the government communication function in international development. The following questions informed the discussion:

- How do we develop and promote this area of work in international development?
- How do we elevate these and related issues onto the development and policy-making agendas of governments as well as bilateral and multilateral institutions?

Summary of discussion

The discussion revolved around the following topics: take a long view; frame the work in terms of desired outcomes and potential impact; demonstrate value of this area of work and of the profession; the need for stocktaking of capacity cross-nationally.

- Take a long view; frame the work in terms of desired outcomes and potential impact

An important task is determining how to frame the incentives and interests involved in improving government communication going forward: Is it part of a democratic agenda or a

development agenda? Is it about effective governance, broadly? The framing depends on the audience.

Success in this area, like in the realm of preventative medicine, is difficult to prove. When governments communicate effectively, crises can be averted. Focusing on responsive government, media development, and communication in support of various development goals represents an effective approach to promote government communication capacity.

Are transparency, accountability, and governance “loaded” terms? The analytical framework of improving governing communication is not always practical. Perhaps a “systems” or “systematic” approach is more appealing to both donors and governments. Similarly, capacity building can be framed in terms of building trust and the resulting benefits of long-term relationships with constituents and the media.

- Demonstrate value of the work

While there is a growing demand for improved government communication capacity among client countries, much more needs to be done to demonstrate the value of such work. For governments, communication is about self-interest. They usually express demand for assistance on their communication capacities close to election time. Compelling examples of the consequences of communication failure and success during non-election season could serve as motivation for governments to invest in their own communication capacity.

Factors of communication failure and success can be identified when comparing different countries’ communication strategies and their outcomes with regard to a specific example (e.g., food crisis). Government communication capacity is often tied to projects. It may be necessary to delink it and, in some cases, make it the central focus of development projects.

An important task is raising the status of communication professionals and recognizing the value that global good practices in government communication can provide. For this, it can be useful to establish peer-networks between developing and developed countries, as well as South-South knowledge exchange.

- Need for stocktaking of capacity

A survey could be taken to capture a broad profile of government communication capacities worldwide. This would help to narrow in on the strategic opportunities that are available. We need to understand the way governments work, who the influentials are, and how multiplier effects can be utilized. On the other hand, government communication plans are often confidential, therefore a stocktaking effort or audit may only provide structural data.

Government innovation in communication tends to lag behind the media, and in that light governments are more likely to pursue improving capacity when they find themselves “threatened” and unable to “keep up” on certain issues. In contrast, communication in the military has become far more important than an add-on to other projects and strategies. In addition, support could provide briefs for ministers (especially when they are newly appointed) and senior spokespeople about the specific communication needs in their area of work.