Joint Communications: Forming and Strengthening a UN Communications Group

A brief guide to building a coherent inter-agency communications team at the country level. These recommendations are based on the UNCG-Country Basic Operating Model, lessons learned from the Delivering as One pilots, and several UNCG-Country terms of reference.

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1   Introduction

A UN Communications Group (UNCG) is the agreed common platform for organizing joint communications at the country level. Its basic format and terms of reference were agreed in 2006 by senior communications managers from across the UN system.[1] The UN Communications Group is a practical tool for bringing the UN system's communications resources and skills under a common umbrella. UNCGs already operate in more than 80 countries with varying degrees of success and operational unity.

The Secretary-General, in his 2002 reform proposals, *Strengthening of the United Nations: an agenda for change* (A/57/387), called for enhancing public information. "The United Nations has a compelling story to tell," he said. "That story must be told well, because public support is essential for strengthening the Organization." These stories originate not only at UN Headquarters, but also in locations all over the world, often involving not one but several UN organizations. The creation of the UN Communications Group was inspired by the challenge by the Secretary-General to strategically communicate the collective UN story and achieve the greatest public impact.

The success of a UN Communications Group is largely determined by its ability to coordinate activities at country levels. While policies are made at the headquarters of UN organizations, the implementation of those policies depends on the ability of the country teams to cooperate and coordinate locally and/or regionally.[2]

To conduct effective joint communications, every UNCT should create or strengthen a UNCG. It will help your country team unite and increase your impact on development. A UNCG can help your UNCT work better together—so long as you give it enough resources and ensure communications staff have the necessary skills to lead communication initiatives that support change.

The UNCG should provide leadership in communications for the UN Country Team, identify new and creative ways to show how UN programmes are delivering results (emphasizing inter-agency collaboration), support policy advocacy, and promote a coherent image of the United Nations. Additionally, for UNCTs engaged in a change management process, the UNCG should provide support with particular attention to internal communications.[3]

Communication is a key component of any change process. The establishment of strengthened UNCGs or communications working groups and task forces is a critical factor in improving the flow of information between agencies and UN staff members. Increased interaction among UN

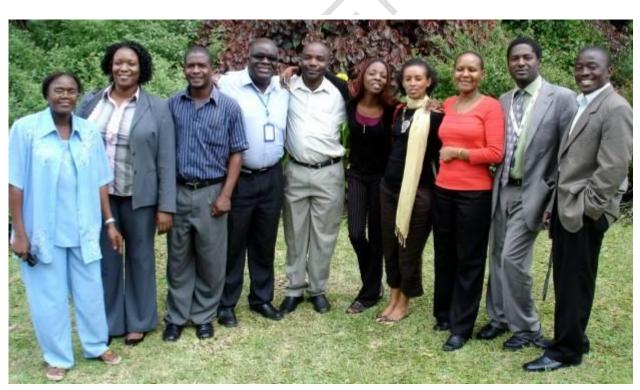[1] UN Communications Group at the country level: Basic Operating Model (Adopted by the UN Communications Group, 2 March 2006, and updated at the UNCG annual meeting in June 2006.)
[2] These points are derived from UNCG-Malawi's ToR.
[3] For the Basic Operating Model of UNCG at the country level, please visit www.un.org/uncg (user name: uncg: password: uncg001)

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communications officers enhances inter-agency understanding and knowledge. Preparing joint communication strategies, work plans, campaigns, and websites fosters a stronger sense of togetherness among communications officers.

The UNCG should not be limited to one aspect of communications. Potentially, it can provide a full range of services: public information, communication for development, programme communications, and internal communication. By combining staff talent from across the UNCT, a good UNCG has the potential to be more than the sum of its parts. Rather, it can be a team with a healthy roster of wide ranging experiences and different areas of expertise.

With organizational support from Headquarters and UN offices operating on the ground, the UNCG can become an indispensable tool for leading communications efforts to unite the UN Country Team and help it to deliver more effectively and efficiently.

Malawi's UN Communications Group is united.

2   Setting up a UN Communications Group

In creating a UNCG, it is essential to demonstrate to member agencies the clear benefits of participating in joint communications work. This requires strategic planning to ensure UNCT communications generate synergies, amplify both the UN system's voice and the voices of individual agencies, and increase the impact, effectiveness and efficiency of communications. Joint communications should not be viewed simply as additional work. The UNCG should meet regularly to build relationships and share information consistently.

The UNCG does not supersede or replace the public information and advocacy efforts of individual agencies and organizations. On the contrary, it enhances these individual efforts by sharing of information and expertise, pooling resources, coordinating of public information, advocacy and media campaigns and promoting coherent messaging. The group should be an information network that helps all UNCT members to think and act together.

Local circumstances, resources, and the presence or absence of a UN Information Centre (UNIC) or Resident Coordinator's Office communications professional dictates different UNCG models. Each country team should choose a configuration that best meets local needs with available local capacity. See "Communicating as One: Lessons Learned from Delivering as One in 2007" for examples of different models. This document also draws lessons from several other UNCG-Country ToRs.

2.1   Purpose
The purpose of the UNCG at the country level is to strengthen inter-agency cooperation in the field of communications, ensure that messages are consistent, and increase the media profile of UN activities at the national and/or regional level. It provides leadership in communications for the UN Country Team, communicates pertinent information and highlights overarching concerns, identifies new and creative ways to show how UN programmes are delivering results, supports policy advocacy and advice, and promotes a coherent image of the UN.

2.2   Membership
The UNCG at the country level should include communications focal points of all UN entities operating in-country. Recognizing that communications specialists are present in only a few UN agencies, appropriate communications focal points should be appointed by UN agencies who will serve as their respective spokespersons. An alternate should also be appointed whenever possible. Non-resident agencies should also be represented in the group through a designated focal point who is responsible for keeping these agencies informed of communications activities and relaying information and requests from them to the UNCG.

2.3   Leadership
The Resident Coordinator, with support from the local UNIC/UNIS if present, should take the lead in setting up the local UN Communications Group and making executive decisions about its structure and funding.

Under the guidance of the RC, the group should identify a chairperson, convener or moderator. The UNCG can be chaired by the Director/Officer-in-Charge of the UNIC, if one exists, or, with agreement from participating UN entities, the most senior Information Officer of any UN agency represented in that country, or the communications specialist in the Resident Coordinator's Office. The situation will vary from country-to-country depending on the composition of the team; UNCT members should work together to agree on the best solution. A variety of arrangements are possible. For example, the most senior communications officer can chair the group, while the RC communications officer acts as a facilitator and secretary for the group. Alternatively, the chair could rotate annual between different agencies. Ultimately the Resident Coordinator has final say.

The Chairperson coordinates implementation of joint activities under the Joint Communication Strategy, working closely with the Communications Specialist in the Resident Coordinator's Office. The UNCG Chairperson sits in UN Country Management Team meetings and briefs management on the activities of the Group. The UNCG chair should attend monthly meetings of the Inter-agency Programme Committee, Operations Management Team, and any other relevant meetings, to ensure that communications elements are included in all senior management decisions. The chairperson's responsibilities also include following up on action points and delegating tasks to the secretariat and working group members, designating an alternate chair in case of absence, drafting the agenda for meetings.

The Communications Specialist in the RCO, who is also a member of the UNCG, documents the change management and UN Coherence process for the RCO and supports the UNCG Chairperson with the coordination of activities under the Joint Communication Strategy.

The UNCG Chairperson and the Communications Specialist should jointly support the functioning of all the UNCG working groups.

2.4   Reporting Lines

The country level UNCG reports to the Resident Coordinator, as well as to Heads of Agencies at the country level. All UNCGs are also expected to report to the global UNCG Secretariat (the Department of Public Information) at least once a year on the activities undertaken. The Development Operations Coordination Office (DOCO) should also be sent copies of these reports, so it can collect lessons learned and share good practices including via www.undg.org.

2.5   Secretariat

The UNIC/UNIS should provide a secretariat to the group. In places where a UNIC does not exist, the UNCG will jointly agree on the assignment of Secretariat responsibilities, which may be provided by the RC Office. The RC/HC will be a focal point of last resort, if necessary. The secretariat should developing and maintain a contact list of UNCG members, send out meeting invitations, compile and circulate minutes and action points, and performing other duties as mandated by the Chair and UNCG members.

3   UNCG Guiding Principles

UN Country Teams seeking to become more coherent, effective and efficient should also make efforts to integrate their communications activities. For the UN to be regarded as a strong and cohesive entity, its participating agencies must communicate together in a strategic and integrated way.

The UNCG should pursue a communication strategy that is based on supporting national development priorities, the UN Development Assistance Framework and common programming document. The group's annual priorities should be based on the UNDAF's annual priorities and the UNCT's programming priorities.

The UNCG should portray the UN as a key contributor to improving the lives of people in your country and through its programmes and development cooperation with the Government and local partners.

3.1   UNCG agreed guiding principles

The UN Communications Group has agreed on the following global guiding principles:

1. UN system partners must work together and speak together. This does not mean the UN must "speak with one voice," but it does mean the overall messaging should be complementary as agencies speak according to their mandates. Since much of the outside world perceives UN organizations as one entity, it is critical that the communication branches of member organizations speak without contradicting each other and that, where possible, they highlight the contributions of other concerned agencies.

2. Each organization should identify its own information focal points who can serve as spokespeople when called upon, and take the lead in areas of their expertise.

3. When complaints or criticisms are made, UN communicators must display an openness to investigate errors and to report back on findings.

3.2   Guidance from the Secretary-General and the Policy Committee

In June 2008, the Secretary-General's Policy Committee (which includes the chair of the UN Development Group and the Under-Secretary-General for Public Information) decided that communications at all levels of the UN system "should focus on illustrating and explaining how the goals of the Organization, as expressed in the Charter, are being achieved through the Secretary-General's vision. This should help unify the UN family, illustrate the UN at work, mobilize different constituencies and link it to the daily lives of the peoples of the world."[4] The SG and the Policy Committee also decided that:

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[4] Decisions of the Secretary-General – 25 June 2008 meeting of the Policy Committee, Decision No. 2008/23 – UN Communications

The Secretariat and the heads of the UN agencies, funds and programmes should take concrete measures to strengthen the UN Communications Group (UNCG) as a communications mechanism for the UN system at the global, regional and country level, including through the draft standard procedure for communicating in times of crisis just approved by the UNCG principals. They should also include communications personnel in the design and implementation of policy recommendations.

UN communications, at Headquarters, regional and country levels, should make greater efforts to develop new partnerships and reach specific audiences, especially youth; and expand the circle of "friends of the Secretary-General/United Nations" who could serve as "surrogate spokespersons" for the UN to highlight—independently of the UN—the policy priorities of the Secretary-General and the Organization and the rationale behind them.

The UN and senior officials should take advantage of new technologies and new media and develop the capacities and skills required to make effective use of them.[5]

3.3 Further guidelines for your UNCG

It will be very useful to draft a set of guidelines or protocols on communicating together to define the roles and responsibilities of the UNCTs' communications professionals, and other staff and managers. Agencies' financial responsibilities should also be defined. The guidelines could also include criteria and the minimum qualifications for recruiting new communications staff. All UNCG members should have a role and a voice in developing these guidelines to ensure that everyone "owns" them. The UNCT management team should formally endorse these guidelines.

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[5] Decisions of the Secretary-General – 25 June 2008 meeting of the Policy Committee, Decision No. 2008/23 – UN Communications

4 UNCG Suggested Activities[6]

Your team may find it helpful and effective to create dedicated task forces for a particular theme or target audience. For example, each joint programme can be given a communication component and a communication focal point who ensures smooth information-sharing and coordination of all communication activities. It can be helpful to have a lead agency for each of the working groups or task forces to coordinate activities.

Shifting from agency-based communications to issue-based communications tends to strengthen UNCT communications messages and products. Issue-based communications tend to be more complete and reinforced by broader expertise.

The UNCG can also help to simplify the often confusing set-up and organization of the UN system for the public and media, providing them with the option of a single source for UN information and access.

At each UNCG meeting, task forces can provide updates on achievements, plans and challenges. The RC communications specialist can provide support and be part of every task force to ensure synergy and integration of information, messages, branding, and focus.

Non-resident agencies can also be part of communicating together by, for example, providing communications support and input from their headquarters.

Depending on local needs, expertise and availability of resources, a UNCG-Country can carry out various activities. The following list expands on the UNCG agreed terms of reference, and should be considered recommendations. The UNCG ToRs are official guidance.

4.1 Regular meetings

The Communications Group will meet regularly (weekly, bi-weekly or monthly) to discuss common communications issues and challenges, devise common responses, and undertake collective action. Brief summaries including agreed action points will be prepared and circulated among all communications staff stationed in the country. The frequency of the meetings will be determined by each UNCG-Country.

4.2 Information-sharing and outreach

The UNCG should improve coordination among UN agencies and non-UN partners by sharing contacts, information on key programme and public information initiatives, advocacy campaigns and media events. This includes liaison and coordination with communications offices at the country, regional and headquarters levels, maintenance and dissemination of common contacts

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[6] Based on the Terms of Reference for the UN Communications Group at the country level, Basic Operating Model (Adopted by the UN Communications Group, 2 March 2006)

lists, including information focal points, international and local media and agency contact lists, and lists of official spokespersons.

4.3   Strategic communications and joint planning

UNCG-Country will develop an annual communications strategy to carry out national public information activities on UN priority issues, and to adapt and localize public information mandates to take into account the national media environment and local needs. The strategy should include both internal and external communications, and should promote key programme initiatives as well as present a coherent image of the aid effort in the country by engaging in joint outreach events and advocacy initiatives and by identifying new and creative ways to demonstrate how the UN and its partners are delivering results. Such activities should aim to include relevant government counterparts.

4.4   Media relations and press releases

The UNCG communicates the results of the UN system's work to decision-makers and the general public through international and local media. Designating a lead agency for each topic helps to address the issue of responsibility. Such outreach includes developing and maintaining relationships with both international and local news organizations, responding to journalist queries, facilitating media visits and organizing joint field missions to showcase UN and partner activities in specific areas. The UNCG can also develop op-eds and work with local editors and opinion columnists to shape commentary on local and global UN priorities.

While each member of UNCG-Country will continue to issue individual press releases pertaining to organizations' activities, joint press releases will be produced on key UN priority issues and activities, such as the Millennium Development Goals and UN reform. These press releases issued through/by the UNIC or UNCT will help the public to better understand the integrated nature of the work carried out by UN organizations at the country level. To ensure coherent messaging, press releases of individual agencies should be routinely shared with all members of the UNCG prior to their release.

4.5   Calendar of media and public events

To avoid scheduling conflicts and to better plan Country Team events, the Communications Group will prepare and circulate a calendar of activities every month. This will include public events, such as seminars and other public gatherings and media-related activities, such as press conferences, visits by senior UN officials and the launch of reports. The UNIC, if present, will be responsible for producing the calendar, with inputs from all UNCG members. In the absence of a UNIC, the RC Office or the UNCG Chair should produce the calendar.

4.6   Field missions for media

The UNCG-Country can periodically organize joint field missions for members of the local media to showcase coordinated UN system activities in specific areas (e.g. visits to refugee camps to underline the work of several agencies).

4.7   Radio and TV programmes

In countries where local UNICs are able to produce and air radio programmes through arrangements with national broadcasting authorities and/or private partners, UNCG-Country members will be invited to contribute stories and news items to these radio programmes. The UNIC will retain editorial control, but programme contents will be discussed in advance with the UNCG-Country and its guidance will be sought on future programming. A similar approach will be taken with regard to producing TV programmes where such possibilities exist.

4.8   Electronic newsletter

In order to highlight the inter-related nature of UN work and the extent of its involvement at the national level, UNCG-Country will circulate a newsletter every month/fortnight/week (whichever is feasible), aimed at opinion leaders (Government officials, journalists, academics, NGO representatives, etc). The newsletter will serve as a clearing house of information and ideas by providing highlights of current activities and informing readers about upcoming activities/events. The UN Communications Group will coordinate regular submissions to the UN Information Centre, which will centralize contributions, package them, and disseminate the final product electronically.

4.9   UN System Information/Promotion kit

The Communications Group will create a common press kit to include fact sheets dedicated to the work of UNCT members covering the most important elements related to their activities. It will also include contact details of all communications focal points and will be offered to all visitors and media representatives. The kit may include brochures, fact sheets, stickers, roll ups, t-shirts, etc.

4.10 UN Country Team identity and promotional materials

The UNCG can develop a common UN Country Team visual identity in-line with the UN system and UN agency guidelines. The collective identity typically serves as an umbrella for individual agency logos and branding. The UNCT logo usually appears on all UNCT-wide communications, and together with individual agency logos in certain cases. It does not supplant the use of agency logos, but rather is an additional visual cue that all the agencies are part of one family.

4.11 UNCT Website

The UN Information Centre, in close collaboration with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, will maintain—wherever possible—a UNCT website to provide access to individual agencies' sites and highlight collaborative activities of the UN System in that country. The website will offer a gateway to UN activities in the country and provide a platform for interaction with partners.

4.12 Common observances of important dates, special occasions and joint communications campaigns

Observance of UN Day (24 October) and other special occasions provide excellent opportunities to showcase the work of the United Nations and rally stronger support for the Organization at the national level. Some of the most successful UN days are those led by the Government and to which one or more UN agencies lend support. The Communications Group will encourage relevant Government bodies to recognize key days, including Human Rights Day, AIDS Day, World Health Day, etc. A working group created by UNCG-Country will work directly with the concerned governmental agencies and ensure the involvement of as many local UN agencies as possible. In order to better coordinate inter-agency cooperation, an annual calendar of special days/events will be prepared and posted on the UNCT website in consultation with all Agencies.

4.13 Internal communication

The UNCG should implement special strategies and plans for internal communications, especially in country offices engaging in change management. Activities may include producing an internal UN bulletin, key messages, and coordinating general staff meetings, seminars and briefings.

4.14 Networking

The UNCG facilitates networking and information exchange among communication professionals at country level, including media and communication professionals among UN partners such as Government, NGOs and donors.

4.15 Capacity-building

The UNCG organizes training for UN communication officers in various skill areas essential to producing high-quality communications, including writing, graphic design, internal communication, communication for development, and web publishing. Capacity-building could also include media training for UN Representatives and Communication Officers in each agency and training local journalists in UN issues to enhance their knowledge of the UN's work.

4.16 Specialized communications

Whenever possible, the UNCGs should be encouraged to closely integrate their communications to support the overall UNCT programming objectives, e.g. for joint programmes. A strong UNCG can also conduct programme communications, communication for development[7], policy advocacy, and integrated marketing communications for behavioural impact[8].

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[7] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Development_communication
[8] http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/imc/

4.17 Crisis communications and management

In the event of a sudden-onset emergency—whether from natural disasters, conflict or the outbreak of disease—the UNCG supports the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), Country Team and/or official spokespeople, in managing the flow of information and messages both internally or externally. This includes distributing fact sheets, contacts and lists of official spokespersons to media outlets, organizing media briefings and press conferences, drafting statements and press releases, and providing background information. For more details, please see the UNCG paper "Communicating together in times of crisis: Standard Operating Procedures for the UN system", which was endorsed by UNCG principals at their seventh annual meeting in June 2008. In the event of a serious crisis, the UNCT should consider whether additional surge communications capacity or a crisis communications expert should be recruited or requested from headquarters.

5   Role of the UNCG in UN Coherence and Change Management

If your UN Country Team is making special efforts to work together more coherently, the UNCG can do a lot to support that process. Don't think of communications officers only as the people who make brochures, pamphlets, and press releases. They can also help to organize what your managers do, when they do it, and especially what they say and how they say it.

To effect change, you must understand staff and stakeholder perceptions. The UNCG can conduct or commission surveys of staff and stakeholders to determine their knowledge level, attitudes, and behaviour on key issues including coherence.

A clear sense of purpose is essential for change. The UNCG can help shape the vision for change, develop key communicators in the organization and organize meetings and discussions. It can help the key coordination players to shape the content of their messages on coherence, and develop those messages for your local context and stakeholders, and select the appropriate channels and packaging for those messages.

The communications team can organize and systematize your internal communications. Strategically-managed employee communications is a relatively new concept, especially for the UN. But it's very important, and for an organization in the throes of change, it's crucial.

The UNCG can do a lot to encourage your team to work together effectively.

6   Funding, Office Space and Human Resources for the UNCG

6.1   Funding

The experience of the eight Delivering as One pilots suggests that it can be helpful to establish a common budget for the UN Communications Group. For example, this could take the form of a special pooled fund for joint communications activities, with resources provided from the common budget and agency contributions.

It can be useful to have a common budget with funds apportioned to different communications task forces. Lead agencies or offices within the task forces can receive the funds, be accountable for spending them, and ensuring that activities are implemented. Funds should be disbursed according to agency guidelines and procedures.

UNCTs pursuing pooled funding for communications activities may want to consider seeking addition funding for these activities, or allocating some common funding to joint communications activities.

6.2   Human Resources

Effective joint communications requires skilled professionals who are willing to commit their time to joint activities. To creating clear incentives for doing so, it is advisable to include in the ToRs of all communications officers that 10-20% of their time should be devoted to joint communications activities. Precisely measuring this commitment is less important than ensuring that UN agency heads understand and regularly reinforce this commitment to joint activities, and ensure that their communications staff are rewarded for their contributions to the success of the team.

Your UNCT may need to explore recruiting or training to strengthen the communications team. The pilots found it useful to undertake a communications capacity assessment and capacity development programme. Staff may feel strategic or joint communications result in additional work or more complex tasks, however providing them with training opportunities can help to balance this perception. Many UNCG staff tend to be public information officers who lack the expertise to engage in strategic programme communication and policy advocacy. As a result, building a strong UNCG may require a combination of training and recruiting more experienced and highly skilled communications specialists.

The UNCG will inevitably include communications officers with a wide range of experience and skills; in some cases agency representatives will not be communications professionals at all.

Balancing capacities across agencies is not easy to achieve. It takes skilled coordination from the lead communications specialist and the RC to ensure the UNCG balances including all agencies with allocating tasks according to relevant expertise. But this is one reason why a UNCG can deliver more effective communications: team members support each other, learn from each other, and apply specialized skills. Ultimately, if capacity is not up to the UNCT's aspirations, the team should invest in recruiting more qualified communications professionals. The results will be worth it. Rather than remaining a fragmented group of low-level generalists, a good UNCG can become an effective team with a mix of experience and expertise that benefits the UNCT and supports the UNDAF and programme objectives.

6.3   Office Space

If it is possible to house some or all members of the UN Communications Group together in the UNCT's office space, you may wish to explore this option. The Delivering as One pilots offer different models on how co-location can work. A UNCG office could operate as a common office for all communications professionals or a designated communications workspace provided by the UNIC or RC Office.

Sharing a common space sends an important physical message that communicating together is no longer business as usual, but rather a step toward creating a true UN communications team.

7   Resolving Challenges

UN Coherence is an opportunity for your communicators to go beyond their communications mandates and become catalytic players in the programming process.

It is quite likely your country team will encounter challenges when setting up or strengthening your UN Communications Group. To surmount obstacles, you may find it helpful to give the UNCG specific roles. For example, it can be assigned to act as a newsroom inside the UN Country Team with a mandate to hover around and pick up stories for internal and external audiences. By aligning institutional priorities with the interests of the public, the UN can develop an inter-agency understanding on what needs to be communicated and how.

Develop a common annual work plan for the UNCG and ensure the RC and heads of agencies endorse it. Get broad UNCT agreement on the advocacy agenda and key messages for the year. Build surge capacity into the work plan and enforce protocols within the team with support from the RCO and agency heads.

Make an effort to define and delineate the responsibilities of the UNCG, both for standard communications work and for communications that support change management and UN Coherence. Draw up agreed guidelines on how the UNCG will conduct its work and how agencies will communicate together. Make sure that it's clear who will do what, when, and how—and above all, why. And remember that like joint programming, joint communications starts with collective brainstorming and joint planning.

"The only way to change the culture of the UN is through teamwork."
— UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon