Information Communications Systems Strategy: A Look at the Communication Strategy of The United Nations in Kenya

Arthur Buliva

United States International University - Africa

abuliva@usiu.ac.ke

Abstract

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are a key feature in many developing nations, amongst which Kenya falls. Nearly 53% of the Kenyan population lives and works in the rural areas [1]. It is indeed in the rural areas that the NGOs thrive, as the NGOs seek to develop the lives of the inhabitants.

This paper will examine how the United nations as an example of an NGO - through its sub agencies like the World Food Programme (WFP), United nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF) among others - creates and implements its information communications strategy.

Information Systems (IS) strategy is a comprehensive plan that information technology management professionals use to guide their organizations. Like any other strategy, this strategy is all about a road plan:

1. Where are we now

2. Where do we want to go?

3. How will we get there?

Rural development in Kenya today is an important feature of the government. Different players and stakeholders offer variety and diverse perspectives on it. Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in Kenya have established themselves in key areas and positions in the political, social and economic aspects across the country. A large scope of their work has involved human development in the rural sector.

However, there has been little effort in understanding how NGOs in Kenya, and in particular the United Nations, involves itself in using communication as a tool in addressing the issue of sustainable rural development.

A study was conducted to see how some Indonesian NGOs, in their endeavour to respond to and

broaden the discourse, utilise Internet technology [4]. We will use a similar approach in order to understand how the UN in Kenya works to develop a communication strategy, but using Kenya as a case study.

Background

On 16 December 1963, Kenya became a member of the United Nations [7]. With this membership, Kenya and the UN had to work together in co-operation. Indeed, the United Nations had to come up with a strategy in order to build up its presence in the country. Part of that strategy needed to be a communications strategy that makes use of Information Technology in order to communicate its cause. This is what our focus is on.

At present there are over 60 offices of UN Funds, Programmes and Agencies in or operating from Kenya [2]. Total number of UN staff working in Kenya is close to 4600. In addition some common services (e.g. Kenya Security Coordination) are provided to Bretton Woods Institutions (IMF, World Bank) and associated international organizations (e.g. IOM, ICC etc.).

UN assistance to Kenya is realized on the basis of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) [5] which emphasizes the principles of UN Delivering as One (DaO), aimed at ensuring Goverment ownership, demonstrated through UNDAFs full alignment to Goverment priorities and planning cycles, as well as internal coherence among UN agencies and programmes operating in Kenya.

The UNDAF narrative includes five recommended sections: Introduction and Country Context, UNDAF Results, Resource Estimates, Implementation Arrangements, and Monitoring and Evaluation as well as a Results and Resources Annex [1].

As an example, the current UNDAF for Uzbekistan was signed in May 2009 covering a six-year period from 2010 to 2015 [3]. The document identifies four priority areas of assistance:

1. Economic well-being of the most vulnerable;

2. Social services

3. Environment with emphasis on principles of sustainable development

4. Good governance. The UNDAF is implemented

---

[1] Inclusion of a section on Initiatives outside UNDAF was considered but it was UNCTs agreement that all initiatives would fall within the utilized framework [5].

through partnerships and collaborative relationships with institutions of the Government of Uzbekistan at the national and sub-national levels as well as with international organizations and members of the civil society.

This document serves as a very good base framework on which we can look at the communication strategy of the UN in Kenya.

Communication and Information systems play a critical role in promoting effective inter-agency work. It is also essential when it comes to creating the necessary partnerships and resources to address the humanitarian needs that may arise.

The Strategy

The Information and Communication strategy is outlined as follows:

1. The provision of a coordinated and overarching communication framework that seeks to to improve UN coherence and also improve the efficiency of its development action and humanitarian response.

2. To build public awareness which is based on a perception survey about the UN system and its contribution to overall national development goals.

3. To promote partnerships, to show how the UN delivers results, to inspire positive action, and advocate for specific issues policies and international norms and standards that will help Kenya achieve its development priorities with equity.

4. To focus on four broad thematic areas of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for 2010-2015:

    - Economic Well-Being. Improvement of the economic well-being of vulnerable groups (residents of economically underdeveloped, mainly rural areas; women, particularly home-based workers; labour migrants and their families; children, particularly most-at-risk adolescents; the elderly; HIV-positive people; and people with disabilities).

    - Social Services: Provision of enhanced access to and utilization of relevant, quality essential social services, i.e. education, health, nutrition,

STI/HIV/drug use prevention, social protection of children and early childhood development.

- Environment: Integration of the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes.

- Governance: Enhancement of the effectiveness, inclusiveness and accountability of governance at the central and local levels.

5. To focus on crosscutting issues will include gender, youth participation, human rights; enhancing legal frameworks; preservation of the national heritage; climate change; and advocacy with regard to the MDGs.

Building Blocks of the UN Communication Strategy

In order to make sure that the strategy was viable, the members of the UNCG made a plan to make use of a set of 'building blocks' that constituted the following theme areas:

- External Communication: Newsletters, Advocacy, Media (including social Media) Events and Visibility,

- Internal Communication: UN intranet, UN Induction Package and Recognition and Awards Programme.

- Emergency Communication: Guiding principles and standard operating procedures (SOPs)

External communications

The United Nations uses different tools in order to communicate with entities and partners outside its workforce. Many methods have been created that work to maximize opportunities for shared advocacies regarding the goals, values and guiding principles of the UN. These methods work to ensure consistent messaging on issues of common interest.

These communication tools and methods aim to provide:

Visibility Greater visibility of the the United Nations and the work that it is doing in Kenya is critical for the success of the body's efforts in development works. Having an increased public awareness, and indeed maintenance of the said awareness, makes the general public aware of the values and principles that the UN upholds. In turn, this helps the UN in kenya to analyse the objectives, impact and

4

opportunities created with the increased exposure.

During the process of developing the UNs joint visibility agenda, there is a high need for there to be strategic thinking and objectivity in order to ensure the UN's brand identity and long-term reputation is not tarnished.

Partnerships The UN does not work in isolation. It collaborates closely with Government and civil society partners. Consequently, the communications strategy emphasizes on the need for cultivating existing partnerships and collaborations as well as encouraging formation of new partnerships.

These collaborative relationships and strategic partnerships aim to help the UN to maximize their record in addressing various development and human rights related issues. The relationships also provide a great opportunity to promote a participatory approach to planning, development, implementation and monitoring of the UNs technical assistance programmes, thus making them more sustainable. Strategic partnerships will also help minimise duplication of efforts.

Target audiences After a review of target audiences by individual UN agencies, the following categories have been identified as most important to the majority of the agencies: [5]

- Government and its ministries/agencies

- Parliament

- Mass media

- Civil society organizations

- Donor community

- Academia, research institutions

- Youth organizations and networks

- Community based organizations

- Private sector (an emerging partner)

Key messages

The core role of the UN in Kenya can be reflected in a set of messages which reflect the common vision of the UN entities:

- The Millennium Development Goals give the ultimate strategic goal for the UN system in Kenya.

- The UN aims to help all kinds of people in building a better life;

5

- The UN is an impartial and credible partner in national development;

- The UN brings worldwide experience and advice.

Key Communication channels and tools

The proposed tools/channels range from mass media and web-based dissemination platforms to various public events and particularly include:

Mass media

In order to inform a wide audience, broadcast, print and online media can be leveraged to inform various audiences about issues related to the work of the United nations in Kenya. This will raise awareness on how the UN in Kenya works in supporting national priorities and at the same time create a positive image of the UNs development and humanitarian efforts.

Even though the media environment is not ripe for sustained issue-based debates, the UN agencies can jointly or individually motivate and support journalists to build their own capacity to cover the countrys development process and related issues in a more in-depth and systematic manner.

Working with the media will also include various types of events and processes involving the media for instance press conferences, field trips and capacity building workshops.

Social media

The social media scene is rapidly evolving. This has created many new opportunities and challenges for United Nations communicators, thereby enabling direct and real-time interactivity with UN audiences. There is need for all agencies to observe a bit of necessary caution in order to be vigilant about the risks that come with the nature of this media - social media does not lend itself to an approval-based system. This is necessary in reducing the reputational risk that can be incurred.

Social media tools such as web-based platforms and mobile technologies, as well as tools and platforms that provide the opportunity for people and organizations to quickly and easily publish their own material online, provide comments and/or engage with others often blur the distinction between internal and external communication, and professional and personal communication.

While social media platforms are pretty new within the context of

the UN, the fundamental rules of common sense still apply. Furthermore, rules governing use of traditional media by UN staff still apply. As such, all activity in social media platforms is subject to the UN Secretariats Core Values of professionalism, respect for diversity and integrity, as well as other related behaviour codes, standards and policies. UN agencies Communication Focal Points shall adhere to UN core principles and guidelines on the use of social media platforms for professional organizational communication and outreach [3].

UN in Kenya website

UN in Kenya website [2] is a common platform available to all the UN agencies. This is a public website that can be used for a cost-effective outreach to a wide audience. Managed by the UN Information Centre (UNIC) who provide the management of this website and ensure that all agencies get equal opportunity to put out information.

Content creation and updating id done according to timetable, with the various agencies and departments being in charge of their own content creation, review and updates. and the look and feel of the UN Uzbekistan website will be revamped. More interactive techniques will be used to engage with online visitors in an interesting and meaningful manner. UNIC will use the UNCG (or a smaller group within the UNCG) as a consultative body for content creation, review and updates.

Quarterly newsletter

The UNCG agreed that the UN quarterly publication The UN in Uzbekistan newsletter (a print run of 100 copies) is a effective tool in providing a quick snapshot of the key activities conducted by the UN collectively and individually. It also helps as a quick guide to agency heads and communication officers when they are required to speak/brief about the UNs activities in Uzbekistan. However, it was agreed to review the existing format and content of Newsletter to make it more effective as a tool for external communication, portraying a coherent, unified image of the organization at the country level and showcase successes in its development work.

The UNCG decided that this joint product of the UN Communication Group, created to achieve a wider dissemination of information regarding the work of the United Nations in Uzbekistan needs to be revamped in order to make the efforts of UN agencies more interesting and visible to the strategic part-

ners of the UN. In order to optimise the use of the online media and also achieve a greater outreach without increasing the print run 6 , it was agreed to use a combination of the print and online versions of the Newsletter.

The UNCG members agreed to provide timely, quality inputs for content to UNIC to bring out the Newsletter in a revised print format and also to design an online version that would enable the UN to reach out to key stakeholders, such as programme partners, Government counterparts, international and national NGOs, media and the donor community. It was agreed to focus on the UNs collaborative efforts that are bringing a positive change in peoples lives and surroundings.

In addition to informing partners and stakeholders, the new version of the newsletter will apprise them every quarter of the various advocacy events, campaigns, relevant global and national reports, research documents and analyses produced in partnership with the UN. The UNCG members expressed the need to allocate equal space and visibility to all the UN agencies and a participatory process put together by UNIC for content generation and approval by individual agencies.

It was decided to use more information about the end users of UN-supported programmes and include a larger number of interviews of partners, Government counterparts and beneficiaries to enhance the interest and acceptability of the UN Newsletter The members proposal to develop an online version of the newsletter opens new potential for a much wider distribution of the newsletter and outreach at no additional cost.

UN and national events

Joint commemorations/celebrations of key UN international days and Uzbekistans national observances will be conducted in a more planned and strategic manner. When relevant and to the extent possible, these celebrations will be geared to leverage mass media to promote UN values, principles and standards as well as to support the achievement of programme objectives.

Internal communications

UN Intranet The UNCT Retreat revealed the need to improve internal communication, documentation and information sharing through a joint online platform. The present UN Communication Strategy therefore proposes to establish a joint web-based format in the form of the UN Intranet which could facilitate informing all the UN staff in

the country about the UN vision, help streamline the document exchange on common matters, promote the culture of sharing substantive programme information, better coordinate the UNs advocacy and outreach activities and increase staff awareness on UN activities.

The UN Resident Coordinators Office will be responsible for regular maintenance of the content of the UN Intranet with inputs from the UNCG members or designated Communication Focal Points of the UN agencies. As for the UN calendar of events, UNIC and UN communication focal points will be responsible for regularly updating planned events on the Intranet concerning their respective agencies including trainings, project site visits, major missions etc.

All staff members of UN agencies will have access to the UN Intranet on a need-to-know basis: 1) restricted access for UNCT members only; 2) common access for all UN staff; 3) Technical access to the

Analysis: Successes & Fails

One of the big successes of the communication strategies of the United Nations system in Kenya is the presence of the headquarters of a major agency here - the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). This has ensured that various other agencies have a "big brother" who does the strategies for them to replicate.

Further to that, the other smaller UN offices rely not only on the infrastructure of UNEP, but also the framework that it has built regarding external and internal communication channels.

Because of the very nature of the UN, some functions overlap among the various agencies and this may cause confusion especially if the strategies also overlap. An example is that the United nations Development Programme, UNDP, strategizes on using the government mechanisms in order to foster development, whereas United Nations World Food Programme involves itself with food distribution. UNDP is teaching how to fish while at the same time WFP is giving fish.

The 2007/2008 post-election violence gave a good opportunity to showcase how the communication strategies of the UN can be used for the good of the population. Coming together with the international community showed how the strategy of a collaboration is what is needed in order to move as one.

Much of the Kenyan communication infrastructure such as the Internet, newspaper distribution

channels, etc. have concentrated their efforts around the urban periphery. Much of rural Kenya usually lags behind in getting information. Consequently, the strategic information needed to get the rural areaas u to speed is delivered late or never. Therefore through alternative means should the strategy be focusing on getting the message across.

Conclusion

UN System in Uzbekistan must work together and speak with one voice, in particular during emergencies and humanitarian crisis just as in its daily dealings. This does not mean that the UN must have only a single message or a single spokesperson, but it does mean that the overall messaging be complementary and mutually reinforcing even when agencies speak on their own behalf in accordance with their specific mandates. Since much of the outside world perceives the UN organizations as one entity, it is even more important that the UN communication staff speak without contradicting each other. The UNCG will be an effective platform for coordinating and leading the UN communication efforts in emergencies after the UN Resident Coordinator in Uzbekistan activates the emergency response and SOPs.

The programme and advocacy priorities for United Nations communication efforts in any emergency situation should be determined by the UNCG in consultation with the UNCT. However, in any humanitarian situation caused by natural disaster or man-made circumstances, the UN communication strategy should focus on sending out effective, clear and timely messages through appropriate channels to identified target audiences. The UN must maintain a high level of internal coordination and communication among its various agencies with the objective of speaking in one voice. This will require close coordination between the communication staff of the different UN agencies paying special attention to the harmonisation and complementarity of messages and means of communication with target audiences.

The continuous flow of information and transparency is extremely vital at all times, particularly during emergency situations. An adequate information flow should be ensured by the UNCT and the UNCG, focusing on both external and internal audiences: affected populations, Government counterparts and partners, local, regional and international media as well as UN staff both in Uzbekistan, UN Headquar-

ters in New York and other locations, Regional Offices of agencies and the UN offices of neighbouring countries.

In emergencies, the UN Communications Group (UNCG) will be chaired by the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) in Tashkent or alternate communication focal point from a UN agency as designated by the Humanitarian Coordinator. The UNCG would remain the central organ of any communication and advocacy outreach for the UN in all situations of emergency or humanitarian crisis.

Just like any other form of official communication, social media content ought be in parallel with the United Nations overall policy and positions on the subject at hand. Posting on social media platforms requires sound editorial judgment with due attention paid to content, organizational priorities and user preferences.

All across the UN system in Kenya, coordination is paramount in ensuring effective content planning as well as coherent, timely and consistent messaging through all comminication media.

Overally, the UN Information Centre (UNIC) needs to be in charge of maintaining all UN in Kenya communication platforms. This also includes the main UN Kenya website (http://www.unon.org).

References

[1] Kenya National Bureau of Statistics *The 2009 Kenya Population and Housing Census* Published August, 2010

[2] United Nations Office at Nairobi *United Nations Office at Nairobi* http://www.unon.org Accessed April 3, 2016

[3] United Nations *United Nations Communication Strategy* Published by the United Nations http://www.un.org Accessed April 3, 2016

[4] Yanuar Nugroho *NGOs, the Internet and sustainable rural development: The case of Indonesia* Journal: Information, Communication and Society Volume 13, Issue 1, February 2010 Published online: 10 Feb 2010

[5] United Nations Development Programme *United Nations Development Assistance Framework 2014-2018* Office at the UN Resident Coordinator, Kenya

[6] John Ward and Pat Griffiths *Information Systems evolution; Strategic Planning for Information Systems* 1997

[7] The UN in Kenya *The Permanent Mission of The Republic of Kenya to the United Nations* Published by the Mission of The Republic of Kenya to the United Nations https://www.un.int/kenya/kenya/kenya%E2%80%99s-voice-united-nations-50-years Accessed April 3, 2016

[8] DSJ Remenyi *Strategic Information systems; SISP* 1992

[9] Earl *ISS and IM strategy; Information Management* 1998

[10] Wendy Robson *ISS frameworks; Strategic Management of IS* 1998

[11] Daniel Q. Chen et al. *Information Systems Strategy: Conceptualization, Measurement and Implications*