



Communicating together in times of crisis: Standard Operating Procedures for the UN system¹

Objective: To standardize UN communications guidelines and provide an organizational structure for operating in times of crisis.²

Background: Crises, whether a result of a natural disasters inter/ intra-state conflicts or an act of terrorism, can happen anywhere at any time. They **can** hit places and people when least expected. In recent years, Asia has been hit by tsunami, tropical storms and earthquakes, each leaving behind thousands dead or wounded and hundreds of thousands affected. Bomb attacks against UN premises in Baghdad and Algiers left dozens killed and wounded. Sudden outbreak of violence in Lebanon and Kenya created humanitarian crises, affecting large sections of population of these countries and beyond.

Crises should not be confused with longer-term or continuing emergencies. For the purposes of this SOP, they are situations where the focus of global public attention is on a particular event over a specific period, and the expectations of United Nations action that this focus builds.

To preserve this definition, in terms of both the content and duration of the crisis, a review should be conducted within the first two weeks, and at fortnightly intervals thereafter, to determine whether the situation continues to be a “crisis”, whether it has been resolved or whether it should then be regarded as a longer-term, continuing emergency.

For the United Nations, effective communications and public information, especially in times of crisis, is both a practical tool and an operational necessity. Public perception about the Organization’s response is key to its credibility and public image. Effective public information is also crucial to achieving greater internal coordination and collective action.

¹ Adopted by UNCG principals at the semi-annual meeting, New York, 28 January 2009

Various UN entities, including DPKO, OCHA, UNDP and WMO, have developed guidelines or SOPs for emergency response, but no attempt has been made to systematize the UN system's public information and communications response or to set up a common mechanism during sudden onset crises. The objective of this SOP is to standardize UN communications guidelines and to provide an organizational structure for operating in times of crisis.

The United Nations system, through the network of UN system organizations, UN information centres and information focal points of the Office of the Resident/Humanitarian Coordinators and UN system organizations, already maintains a significant communication presence in over 160 countries, covering most regions of the world. With the establishment of the UN Communications Group (UNCG) as the UN system's common communications platform, a practical tool has been developed for bringing the UN system's communications resources and skills under a common umbrella³. UNCGs already operate in more than 80 countries with varying degrees of success and operational unity. With organizational support from Headquarters and UN offices operating on the ground, the UNCG could be made a more effective tool in leading UN communications efforts in times of crisis.

A. Policy declaration:

The United Nations is committed to being open and transparent in its dealings with the media. It is in the interest of the Organization to work with the media quickly and honestly, and to develop a coherent communications strategy based on those same principles. The Organization should not only react to events but, where appropriate, project its point of view on related international developments. Under no circumstances, should UN officials responsible for communications and public information mislead or conceal. At the same time, given the special nature of the Organization and its operational objectives, they must protect the diplomatic process and organizational confidentiality, where applicable.

B. Guiding principles:

1. UN system partners must work together and speak together. This does not mean that the UN must have only one person speaking, but it does mean that the overall messaging be complementary as agencies speak according to their own mandates. Since much of the outside world perceives the UN system

³ For background information on UNCG, please see reports of the Secretary-General (A/AC.198/2006/2)

organizations as one entity, it is even more important that the communication branches of member organizations speak without contradicting each other.

2. Each organization relevant to a crisis must identify its own information focal points, who can serve as spokespeople when called upon, and take the lead in areas of their expertise. The local coordination of communication messages does not, however, preclude individual agencies sending communication material (data, stories, photos, footage etc) to their headquarters separately for information and fundraising purposes. All statement issued on the crises by the HQs and Regional Offices of the agencies will reflect the messages agreed on and issued by the local UNCG.
3. When complaints or criticisms are made, UN communicators must communicate an openness to investigate errors and to report back on findings.

C. Five simple steps to set up and run a crisis management mechanism

Before crisis:

1. Set up a local UN Communications Group (UNCG-Country⁴)

- i. The UN Country Team (UNCT) which is chaired by the Resident Coordinator, with support from the local UNICs/UNISs wherever they exist, will oversee the establishment and work of the local UN Communications Group⁵.
- ii. The purpose of the UNCG at the country level is to strengthen inter-agency cooperation in the field of communications, ensure consistency of messaging and increase the media profile of United Nations activities at the national and/or regional level as desired. It provides leadership in communications for the UN Country Team, communicates information on the situation and highlights overarching concerns, identifies new and creative ways to show how UN programmes are delivering results and promotes a coherent image of the United Nations.
- iii. UNCG at the country level will include communications focal points of all United Nations entities operating in the country and, if agreed to by its members, will be chaired by the Director/Officer-in-Charge of the UN Information Centre (UNIC), if one exists, or, with agreement from

⁴ For example, UNCG-Pakistan, or UNCG-Egypt.

⁵ For the Basic Operating Model of UNCG at the country level, please visit www.un.org/uncg (user name: uncg: password: uncg001)

- participating UN entities, the most senior Information Officer of any UN agency represented in that country.
- iv. A convener or “moderator” of the group should be identified, which could be either the UNIC/UNIS Director, or another appropriate communications officer from the UN Country Team.
 - v. Recognizing that communications specialists are present in only a few UN agencies, communications focal points will be appointed by UN agencies as they may find appropriate, who will serve as their respective spokespersons. An alternate will also be appointed whenever possible.
 - vi. The country level UNCG will report to the UNCT, chaired by the Resident Coordinator.
 - vii. UNICs/UNISs will provide secretariat to the group. In places where no UNIC exists, the UNCG will jointly agree on the assignment of Secretariat responsibilities. The UNCT will act as provider of a focal point of last resort if necessary.
 - viii. All UNCGs are expected to report to the global UNCG secretariat (the Department of Public Information) at least once a year on the activities undertaken.

During crisis:

2. Automatically activate the UNCG at the country level as soon as a crisis situation emerges

- i. UNCG secretariat, in consultation with the Executive Office of the Secretary-General and key stakeholders on the ground, will activate the SOP by informing the principal UN coordinator on the ground (e.g. SRSG, Head of peacekeeping mission, RC/HC etc.) and the chairperson of the local UNCG. Relevant UN field offices and all UNCG members will be informed immediately on activation.
- ii. The UNCG chairperson, in his/her capacity as moderator of the group, will contact key UN agencies relevant to the crisis and convene a coordination meeting without delay. All UN system public information messages will be channeled through this Group for the consumption of the local and international media on-site, for UN agencies at HQ or regional levels, and for the Spokesperson’s Office at UN Headquarters. In addition, based on the common agreed position, individual agencies will have the flexibility to share additional information and materials with their respective Regional Offices and HQ for use at those levels.

- iii. If no UNCG exists, the Resident Coordinator will ensure that such a group is immediately convened and will designate a focal point/spokesperson.
- iv. The Resident Coordinator will ensure that the UNCG chairperson is invited to attend all relevant senior management meetings, including interagency meetings.

3. Set up a media centre to serve as the hub for all media-related activities for the UN system.

- i. This centre could be located at UNIC/UNIS, or any other appropriate location easily accessible to the media.
- ii. It should be equipped with the appropriate communications technology, and include, wherever possible, teleconference/video conference equipment.
- iii. The media centre should offer its good services to act as a clearing house for media inquiries.
- iv. The Secretariat/convener will prepare a media contact list, identifying UN system information focal points for the media.
- v. A mailing list will be prepared that will include all major local, national and international media outlets currently on location.

4. Organize regular briefings for the media.

- i. Briefings will be chaired by the convener and attended by spokespersons/focal points from agencies/UN offices relevant to the crisis.
- ii. The briefings will take place each day at the same appointed time, at a UN office or a “neutral” public place easily accessible to the media.
- iii. Depending on the gravity of the situation or evolving communications needs, the frequency of the briefing will be determined: once daily or three times a week.
- iv. All common UN statements should be cleared in advance with the appropriate authorities, with overall authority retained by the UNCT locally and with the ERC globally. Additional information materials and statements related to specific agency mandates will be cleared by their respective agencies and to avoid contradictory statements, will use the common UN statement as the reference point.
- v. The UNCG coordinator should hold a short meeting prior to the press briefing with UN system communications focal points and review their respective statements. The objective is to ensure “commonality of purpose”

- and to avoid duplication and contradiction. They will also discuss possible queries from the media and agree on their responses.
- vi. All press statements will be in writing, so that they can be made available to the media, UNHQ and agencies upon request.
 - vii. Whenever possible, the Q & A portion of the briefing should be transcribed.
 - viii. The latest briefing notes should be posted on a regular basis on relevant websites including the UN News Centre and Relief Web.
 - ix. Members of the UNCT and other heads of UN agencies, experts and special guests from Headquarters will be invited to attend the briefing as often as possible or deemed necessary.
 - x. WMO's communications focal points within National Meteorological and Hydrological services, NGO partners, including IFRC and IOM, may be invited to attend the briefing. Only UN agencies and non-UN entities heading clusters (e.g. IFRC, IOM, Save the Children) will address the briefings⁶.
 - xi. An appropriate banner/backdrop will be created that clearly identifies the sponsor of the briefing (United Nations Communications Group) and its location.
 - xii. At the end of each briefing, the press will be informed about the next briefing, including about the possible participation of any high-level guest speaker.
 - xiii. The media team will closely monitor media reports. All inaccuracies and factual errors must always be rebutted, either at the regular briefing or through rejoinders.
 - xiv. UN spokespeople must avoid opinions, speculation and alarmist or emotional language in all communications materials.
 - xv. On security-related information, advice should be sought from the Designated Security Official (DSO) in the country.
 - xvi. All media focal points should hold de-briefing sessions. Each day, or as often as necessary, they will sit together to discuss the briefing session, fine tune their strategy and agree on next steps.

5. Keep UN Headquarters fully informed

- i. The UNCG chairperson/coordinator will stay in close contact with the Secretary-General's Spokesperson for information and guidance, while agencies will keep their respective HQs informed. He/she will send the

⁶ It is important, particularly in crisis and natural disaster situations, that WMO's communications focal points within National Meteorological and Hydrological Services be invited to the briefing.

Spokesperson's Office daily updates – more than once if necessary – including draft statements to be issued at Headquarters on the situation on the ground.

6. Future review

The UNCG secretariat, in association with the relevant UNCG at the country level and/or UN field offices leading coordination, will prepare a “lessons learned” at the end of each crisis, which will be shared with all UNCG members, and, if necessary, revise the SOP accordingly.

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