Communications is a means of providing key program information to external and internal audiences through formal and informal channels. A well-planned and executed communications strategy can help identify program obstacles and opportunities for program success, and promote an enabling environment to broaden program understanding.

As safety net systems develop and programs expand in coverage, the role of effective communications has become increasingly important. This material explores the issues involved in developing strategic program communications.

More than merely providing information, communications facilitates public dialogue and social awareness, and provides a mechanism to enhance program implementation. This applies to a variety of contexts:

- **As programs are introduced**, there may be a variety of communications requirements depending on the nature of the program, as in the Pakistan example below.

- **As programs scale up**, increased visibility implies a need for a clear public relations strategy to share pertinent information that may not otherwise be accessible, to respond transparently to press/public queries, and to ensure the program is always executed in the public’s best interest.

- Communications strategies may facilitate challenging **policy reforms**, as in the Indonesia example below.

**Target audiences and key messages.** Communications messages must be separately tailored to external and internal audiences. **External audiences** cover a diverse spectrum, but typically include program beneficiaries, decision makers at all political levels, academia, the media, and civil society. Public opinion is especially important during changes in government. **Internal stakeholders** include partner organizations that fund and help implement the program, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that contribute to program
accountability, and program staff at various levels. Ensuring internal coherence is critical, as shown in the Colombia example below, and internal stakeholders such as the national congress are especially relevant during budget negotiations.

**Mechanisms.** Messages targeting different audiences should be relayed using a variety of formal and informal channels. These channels include **interpersonal mechanisms** (word of mouth, face-to-face interactions, meetings), **mass media** (print and electronic public documents, Web sites and social media, radio, television, and dissemination of printed materials), and **specialized strategies** (specialized training, seminars, conferences, selective dissemination of meeting notes, internal newsletters, etc.).

**Getting started and staying on track.** The first step in effective communications planning is developing a needs assessment to identify current perceptions of the program, information gaps, and desired communications objectives (see the Pakistan example below). Based on the identified needs, programs can then design their own strategic communications plan that includes messages, channels to reach target audiences, a communications time frame, and estimated costs. Sometimes, however, strategies are not program-specific but are influenced by the implementing agency or overall government communications strategy. Appropriate mechanisms must be made available to monitor and evaluate actions to periodically enhance the communications strategy.

### KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- Often, communications plans are the least prioritized of program processes. Programs often allocate communications roles and responsibilities to nonspecialized program staff as opposed to communications specialists (e.g., a media coordinator or a stakeholder outreach coordinator), thus risking program success.

- Adequate communications activities should be incorporated into project design from the outset and should take into account the local context (e.g., remoteness and lack of formal media access) and existing communications.

- Programs should use ongoing mechanisms to gather stakeholder feedback to measure the impact of the communications strategy and improve this if necessary. These devices can include direct feedback from stakeholder meetings, media monitoring, and tools such as focus groups and opinion research to monitor public opinion.

- More communication does not automatically translate into better outcomes. A communications strategy must be well planned. In certain situations, communication dynamics may even hinder development efforts. For example, an exclusive focus on new social media may not reach the very poor.

- A consistent communications strategy should be used by all stakeholders. The delivery of different information by different sources can result in confusing messages.

- A communications strategy should be able to create a brand name and a unique identity for the program. Recognizable slogans and logos have the capacity to capture the attention of target audiences. In the Latin American context, the importance of
Pakistan: Undertaking a communications needs assessment at the outset of a program

During the second half of 2008, the government of Pakistan launched the Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) as its main national social safety net program. A detailed communications needs assessment was undertaken in connection with the new program, which identified an urgent need to define social protection and to introduce the program in the context of establishing an effective safety net system in the country. The review also identified a need to clarify the difference between BISP and other welfare programs. The media required sensitization and in-depth interaction with program management to better understand BISP.

The review determined several specific messages to convey via the communications strategy, including the following:

- Safety net programs are new initiatives to explore and draw upon.
- BISP is transparent, legitimate, and credible.
- BISP is working at the community level to ensure that poor and vulnerable people can benefit from the program.
- BISP is an initiative to improve the status of women and empower them by making them important and responsible members of the family.
- BISP is not a safety ladder but a safety net.

Colombia: Scaling up communications channels as programs evolve

When Colombia’s Familias en Acción conditional cash transfer program was launched, its communications strategy simply consisted of reaching target beneficiaries. When the program was scaled up a few years later, the program’s decision makers agreed to expand its communications scope to a broader audience. The call for a far-reaching communications plan was the result of a need to avoid misinterpretation on the part of the media, which could harm the program’s image during its expansion stage.

To convey an accurate image of the program, several communications channels were brought together to share the latest information on program progress and obtain continuous feedback on its execution.

- A Spanish-language Web site provides updates on news, events, and recent publications including meeting notes and transfer delivery reports. It also provides general information on partner organizations and beneficiaries as well as transparent procurement bidding process documents, frequently asked questions, and videos, among other items.
- Internal meetings were scheduled periodically with mayors and service providers to discuss accountability aspects and program progress. Reports were drafted based on these meetings to highlight and provide evidence of the need for timely adjustments for program success.
- Radio and TV programs were launched with nationwide coverage.
- Periodic bulletins were published and distributed to the media and to assorted mailing lists of interested stakeholders.

A communications manual was devised by the communications unit of the government social protection agency, Acción Social; it outlines the steps to be taken regarding each of the above-mentioned channels.

“branding” has been critical in terms of creating a social policy trademark that is visible and recognizable to the general public—and the media.

- In many cases, there are possibilities for introducing new means of communication—such as Webinars, blogs, and social networks—provided they meet identified business needs.
Indonesia: Subsidy reform and public information

Description

In 2005, the Indonesian government announced the launch of a fuel subsidy reform and the development of a cash transfer program to compensate those most affected. To sensitize the public and keep society apprised about the need for reform, the government simultaneously launched a communications campaign.

A central part of the communications strategy rested on clear internal messaging and strategic leverage of media. The importance of communicating evidence-based policy decision making was constantly underscored, and research on the impact of subsidies and potential poverty benefits of compensatory transfers produced.

Strategic messages were enforced at the highest level of government. The president stressed the need to have beneficiary information for the unconditional cash transfer ready before the second price increase. Several government officials were trained to answer frequently asked questions for TV and radio shows and to communicate using effective body language; they were provided with other tips as well to improve their communication skills.

The use of different communications channels proved critical. The Ministry of Information and Communication provided a brochure detailing the selection criteria for transfer beneficiaries. The government also developed a Web site where the public could access the latest news and events and updates of transfer disbursement. Open workshops and consultation meetings were conducted; these proved helpful in responding to widespread media critique on the feasibility of introducing a cash transfer operation.

Rwanda: VUP’s communications strategy

Description

Rwanda’s Ministry of Local Government, along with local government officials, is responsible for sharing and explaining the Vision 2020 Umurenge Programme (VUP)—which provides public works, cash transfers, and linkages to financial services—to all the communities under their mandate, including nonrecipient households. To this end, they have jointly prepared communications activities to share program information (e.g., objectives, policy, and procedures). The activities employed so far include live radio and television shows, workshops, leaflets, a Web site, and newspaper articles and newsletters. Activities planned for the future to consolidate the communications strategy include sensitization and training targeted to sector opinion leaders to broaden the dissemination of messages about the VUP. More live interactive shows on regional community radio stations are also planned.

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