Democratic Leadership in Crisis Contexts:
A Communication Guide

Democratic Leadership in Crisis Context:
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Acknowledgments

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Feedback and contact

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Name
CDAC Network	Communication with Disaster–Affected Communities Network
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DCP	The Italian Department of Civil Protection
GCS	Government Communication Service
GFDRR	The Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery
GPPAC	Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict
n.d.	No Date
NDI	The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
NHS	National Health Service
OC	The Operational Committee
OECD	The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
U.K.	The United Kingdom
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
USA	The United States of America
WHO	The World Health Organization

Table of Contents

Figures

Boxes

Executive Summary

As crises increase around the world, from natural hazard events to social crises, communicating effectively with citizens becomes paramount. During crises, citizens need to trust their public leaders and believe that they are receiving accurate communication on how the crisis is unfolding and what actions they need to take. Leaders must provide crisis and risk communication that is transparent, inclusive, accessible, responsive and accountable so that they can build trust and reinforce democratic norms while effectively managing the crisis.

This guide was developed to assist public leaders in understanding how these principles can be better integrated into crisis communication practices to bolster crisis response as well as to provide valuable advice on the important steps that public leaders should take in preparing crisis communication practices, communicating when a crisis occurs, and providing continued communication and gathering feedback after a crisis.

> **"During crises, citizens need to trust their public leaders and believe that they are receiving accurate communication on how the crisis is unfolding and what actions they need to take. Leaders must provide crisis and risk communication that is transparent, inclusive, accessible, responsive and accountable so that they can build trust and reinforce democratic norms while effectively managing the crisis."**

The guide is broken down into three sections: Before crisis, During crisis and After crisis. Each section has a checklist with major activities that should take place as well as a more detailed description of the checklist and how democratic principles can be applied to all communication activities.

▸ The Before crisis section focuses on how public leaders can prepare for crisis communication. This includes recommendations for engaging external stakeholders to improve information integrity, developing community engagement activities to offer more inclusive and accessible communication, and using feedback loops to improve public leaders' responsiveness and accountability.

▸ The During crisis section highlights the steps that public leaders should focus on to ensure transparent crisis communication that reaches as much of the public as possible. Practical advice is provided, such as timing of communication and how to enhance different democratic principles through communication.

▸ The After crisis section provides recommendations for ensuring responsiveness and accountability in the recovery and rebuilding process while enabling continued transparent communication with the public.

Following this guide and recommendations should allow public leaders to further integrate democratic principles into current and future crisis communication activities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Communication in a crisis context

Public communication enables governments to listen to and understand their citizens and supports the "principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, ultimately serving to enhance good governance and build citizen trust" (OECD 2021). In a crisis, communication plays a critical role, ensuring that the public has access to key information.

Democratic governments worldwide are challenged by increasing crises, inequalities and distrust in government systems. Social crises, such as the cost-of-living crisis and conflict, are prevalent around the globe and are becoming increasingly interconnected and complex. For example, 2023 saw the largest number of natural hazard-linked disasters in history, approximately 30 more than the average from 2003 to 2022 (CRED 2024). These crises have occurred in a strained economic landscape, where inflation and the cost of living have created a social crisis across the globe. The interaction of different risks and crises can lead to a polycrisis, which is defined as "a cluster of related global risks with compounding effects, such that the impact exceeds the sum of each part" (World Economic Forum 2023). In this challenging landscape, effective communication becomes increasingly important for public leaders.

> **"Leaders who maintain democratic values, governance structures and practices in crisis communication demonstrate the reliability and necessity of government, helping to build trust with citizens."**

In times of crisis, the public turns to political leaders and government for stability and guidance with reliable crisis communication (Christensen et al. 2016). Communicating with citizens during a crisis is crucial for resolving and managing crisis impacts. Poor crisis communication can further inflame crisis conditions and contribute to societal instability. The absence of necessary and high-quality information can lead to fear, panic, inappropriate behavior and public dissonance (Coombs 2010). In a democratic context, this can translate to distrust in public institutions and political actors, as well as reduced capacity to manage crises in the future (Győrffy 2018). Leaders who maintain democratic values, governance structures and practices in crisis communication demonstrate the reliability and necessity of government, helping to build trust with citizens.

1.2 What is a crisis?

A crisis has been defined as an undesirable or unexpected situation occurring to a person, group, organization, culture, society or the world (Boin et al. 2005). Crises can take various forms, including disasters that result from natural hazards, human-caused disasters, technological crises and protests. A crisis typically results in physical damage, loss or disruption to societies, communities or regions (Kreps 1984). In a crisis, public leaders may need to make rapid decisions under pressure during periods of uncertainty and unknowns (Lerbinger 1997).

Crises also vary in the speed at which they develop (instant vs. creeping) and the speed at which they end (abrupt vs. gradual) (Boin and t'Hart 2001). For example, some crises will have a sharp and decisive beginning and end (e.g., hostage situations or plane hijackings). In contrast, other crises may have a long, slow onset followed by a quick termination (e.g., political conflict with a swift conclusion). Environmental crises are described as slow burning as they creep up slowly and fade away (Boin and t' Hart 2001).

Furthermore, how governments define a crisis and associated response mechanisms varies between constitutional and national contexts. Crises and emergencies are often defined in legislation; therefore, states might have various definitions of a crisis and, consequently, diverse crisis response frameworks and infrastructures. Understanding the type of crisis and the associated national frameworks is therefore important for appropriate communication with citizens.

1.3   What is crisis communication?

Crisis communication is the "collection, processing, and dissemination of information required to address a crisis situation" (Coombs 2010) and is one of the most important crisis management tools for public leaders. The crisis communication process encompasses the collection of information regarding the crisis at each phase, the crisis context, the relevant stakeholders and the dissemination of that information through established communication networks (Coombs 2010).

Crisis communication is relevant throughout the different phases of a crisis, including building public and societal preparedness before a crisis (pre-crisis), responding to a crisis (during a crisis), and recovering from a crisis (post-crisis). As crisis communication also covers the pre-crisis collection and dissemination of information to at-risk people, risk communication also plays a key role. Risk communication refers to "the real-time exchange of information, advice and opinions between experts or officials and people who face a hazard or threat to their survival, health, or economic or social wellbeing" (WHO n.d.).

1.4   Democratic leadership in crisis communications

The recent global pandemic and its responses hit democratic politics hard, exacerbating a trend of more than 15 years of growing authoritarianism. In some cases, democratic governance was a casualty of power grabs and democratic backsliding. In other instances, elected leaders couldn't marshal the wherewithal to act and often lacked the necessary authority, institutions and processes that would enable them to respond rapidly, effectively and democratically to the crisis conditions.

With more than two-thirds of the world's population living under autocratic rule, it is clearer than ever that democracy is not the default setting. Against the current backdrop of authoritarian ascendance, a democracy-blind emergency response can shift power to the benefit of non-democratic actors. Instead, national and international crisis communications should be grounded in an understanding of political dynamics and be proactive in identifying resilience and response measures that shore up democratic institutions and processes. In other words, leaders should be democracy-intentional in designing and delivering their crisis communications to reinforce essential norms, including transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability. Figure 1 below highlights how democratic leaders can use risk and crisis communication.

Public leaders and crisis communication

Using democratic principles in crisis communication can help public leaders to:

Inform stakeholders and raise awareness of risks and threats.

Provide guidance to citizens on appropriate behaviors and measures they can take to reduce risk.

Build trust in leadership.
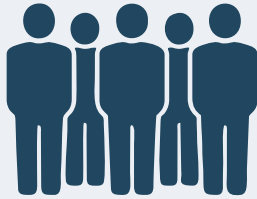
Increase societal cohesion and reduce the risk of unrest.

Manage public anxiety.

Figure 1: Public leaders and the use of crisis communication

For public leaders to effectively manage a crisis, one-way communication may be necessary, which means employing a top-down approach to disseminating information from the communicator to the audience. However, two-way communication allows leaders to engage the audience through feedback and dialogue. Two-way communication enables the public to share valuable local information and ask questions, which has been found to increase awareness of risk and appropriate behavior more effectively (Khan et al. 2022). One way to enhance feedback and dialogue with the public is using feedback loops, a method that allows local public leaders to better engage with the public. This method will be expanded upon in the guide.

This guidebook provides steps, tools and resources to support public leaders in developing both one-way and two-way crisis communication anchored in democratic principles. See Appendix 1 for further resources based on the information in the guide. The guide aligns with long-standing principles and practice guides from the field of disaster reduction relief, such as the **Sendai framework** by emphasizing the critical role of effective communication in reducing disaster risks and minimizing losses in lives and livelihoods while advocating for a shared responsibility among state actors and communities to foster democratic resilience (UNDRR n.d).

1.5   Audience for the guide

This guide is designed to inform democratic leaders at the national and local levels, civil servants, particularly those with a communication role, and crisis communication teams interested in managing crises and communicating risk. It focuses on governments as the main decision-making entities at the national and local levels typically responsible for coordinating crisis management and therefore crisis communications. It provides guidance and examples on designing crisis communication in an inclusive, engaging and effective way.

1.6   Guidance structure

This crisis communication guidebook is structured into five main sections, with sections 2–5 forming a crisis communication toolkit that cover the six democratic principles and the three stages of a crisis:

1. Introduction: This preceding section defines what the term crisis means and introduces the topic of crisis communication.

2. Democratic principles for crisis communication: This section introduces the principles of transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability that underpin democratic crisis communication.

3. Before a crisis: This section details steps that public leaders should take while preparing for a crisis, considering democratic principles to enhance crisis communication.

4. During a crisis: This section outlines what public leaders should do in response to a crisis to improve crisis communication, paying special attention to ensuring that democratic principles are respected.

5. After a crisis: This section highlights the activities that public leaders should undertake in the recovery and rebuilding phase of a crisis to improve crisis communication and adhere to democratic principles.

2. Democratic principles for crisis communication

Crises in all their variations are increasing, and public leaders play a critical role in managing these crises, including communicating key information to their citizens. This toolkit will assist public leaders in developing a crisis communication approach that draws on democratic principles. This toolkit is broken down into three communication phases, with recommendations for:

- ▶ How public leaders should act **before a crisis** when preparing crisis communication plans (section 3)

- ▶ How to ensure effective communication **during a crisis** (section 4)

- ▶ How leaders can communicate **after a crisis** and ensure lessons are learned (section 5)

Transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability are principles that are key to effective crisis communication, and aligning crisis communication with these principles can allow public leaders to better foster public trust. These principles are briefly outlined below before moving on to outline the crisis communication activities that public leaders can undertake before a crisis.

> **"Transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability are principles that are key to effective crisis communication, and aligning crisis communication with these principles can allow public leaders to better foster public trust."**

2.1 What is transparency?

Transparency is the need to "ensure that enough information is provided and that it is provided in easily understandable forms and media" (Parigi et al. 2004, 1). This means that information needs to be communicated early and often, and the **unknown should be highlighted along with what the government is doing to gather information on the unknown**. Transparency in crisis communication is key to improving trust in the government during times of crisis (Zheng 2023).

2.2 What is information integrity?

Information integrity refers to the accuracy, consistency and reliability of the information content, processes and systems that maintain a healthy information ecosystem. Information integrity is key to building public trust in democratic institutions and processes, as it ensures that the **information provided by institutions is credible and verifiable (NDI 2022)**.

2.3 What is inclusion?

Inclusion refers to the need for all segments of society to be considered when designing communication, including marginalized groups who are traditionally excluded. This includes women, young people, persons with disabilities, ethnic and religious minorities, Indigenous Peoples, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) communities.

The **need to include the whole of society** becomes paramount in a crisis, as those typically missing from communication tend to be the most marginalized and impacted by the crisis. Non-inclusive crisis communication will exclude particular groups and potentially increase their vulnerability in a crisis (Anson et al. 2021). Focusing on inclusion will limit the adverse effects of a crisis on marginalized groups.

2.4   What is accessibility?

Accessibility refers to the content of the message itself and how that message is delivered and received to ensure it reaches everyone equitably. When designing communication strategies, leaders must ensure that any communication is "understandable and accessible by all types of people, regardless of their technology, language, culture or disability" (Fernandez-Diaz et al. 2020, 1). While inclusion focuses primarily on making sure the needs of diverse segments of society are considered and actively addressed in crisis communication, accessibility is more **focused on the message itself and how that message is delivered**. This involves identifying and eliminating communication barriers to ensure the equitable participation and representation of marginalized communities in crisis communications. For instance, this might entail hiring a local sign language interpreter to ensure messages reach and are accessible to members of the Deaf community. To ensure crisis communications are accessible to diverse segments of society, including people with different types of disabilities, leaders should provide messages in multiple accessible formats, such as audio, video, sign language, large print and Easy Read[1] formats. Considering accessibility will ensure messages reach everyone so citizens can understand and act on them.

2.5   What is responsiveness?

Responsiveness refers to the need for "authorities and experts to listen to and address people's concerns and needs so that the advice provided is relevant and actionable" (Savoia et al. 2023, 9). Responsiveness allows public leaders to **better communicate with and understand their communities** and their capacities to respond to different communication practices. To achieve this, public leaders need to consider two-way communication with communities to better understand their needs and disseminate information in ways that will resonate and be actionable.

2.6   What is accountability?

Accountability **concerns the answerability of the government to the public**. It refers to both public-facing answerability and upward reporting from civil servants to leaders or checks-and-balances oversight. There must be mechanisms through which leaders can explain their actions (including their communications) and be held responsible for them via consequences, such as rewards or sanctions (Fox et al. 2024). Being accountable will provide the public with explanations about the decision-making process behind policies.

Throughout the guidebook, these principles underpin the crisis communication activities during the different phases of a crisis.

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1   "Easy Read" is a method of producing and presenting written information that is easier to understand and accessible to persons with different types of disabilities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities. Easy Read also benefits people with low literacy levels, those who may not speak a majority language and those experiencing memory problems.

3.   Before a crisis: Preparedness

The time before a crisis should be used to prepare for communicating when a crisis occurs. Box 1 highlights how the different principles can be considered during the preparedness phase to enhance crisis communication.

Box 1: Democratic principles and preparing for crisis communication

Transparency: Before a crisis, transparency is facilitated by the practice of providing frequent and regular updates on government activities in the form of press conferences or other media releases. In this way, citizens will have an established understanding of and expectation concerning government information channels. Preparedness planning entails deciding how to spread information early and often when a crisis does occur, relying on established and effective channels to the appropriate extent.

Information Integrity: Information integrity is supported by setting up teams to monitor the media and social media landscapes to understand the prevalence of information manipulation and implementing strategies to counter the information, prioritizing the most harmful. This can include digital literacy training for CSOs and citizens. Information manipulation often increases during a crisis; such pre-established strategies will prove valuable in mitigating harm. Credible experts should be identified in preparation for the early dissemination of information during a crisis.

Inclusion: Before a crisis, it is important to map and understand the needs of different marginalized groups in a respective community and to build relationships with stakeholders who act as "gatekeepers" for those groups. Public leaders should anticipate types of crises and the different communities likely to be most marginalized by each. This ensures public leaders are aware of the different communication needs in their communities so that no one is unreached when a crisis hits.

Accessibility: In preparing for a crisis, accessibility means ensuring public leaders are aware of the different communication channels or modalities that are appropriate to reach each group. This means, for example, having translation services available, sign language interpreters, and awareness of influential and trusted community leaders and forums to make sure that if a crisis occurs, public leaders will have the means to spread the information to as many individuals as quickly as possible.

Responsiveness: Before a crisis, responsiveness includes establishing forums, channels and processes for two-way communication between civil society generally and public leaders, such as monthly town halls, community meetings or questionnaires to gather community data. This communication provides an established feedback loop where citizens can share their views and interact with public leaders. It should also ensure that feedback is heard and that the status (positive and negative) of top priorities is reported on. These feedback forums will inform community concerns during a crisis and hold the potential to serve as community channels.

Accountability: Learning from previous crisis communication mistakes must be implemented when preparing for future crises. Developing the avenues to ensure the accountability of public leaders before a crisis is also critical to supporting a culture of responsibility facilitating more mature leadership and an openness to scrutiny.

Public leaders can use the time before a crisis to prepare their crisis communication plan, enabling them to respond quickly when a crisis does occur and test these plans. This plan will lay out procedures and activities that public leaders should undertake to ensure effective crisis communication when a crisis does occur. Integrating democratic principles into the plan and associated activities can increase the trust that communities have in their leaders and enhance the crisis response, ensuring that crisis communication focuses on providing a democratic response to crises.

> "Public leaders can use the time before a crisis to prepare their crisis communication plan, enabling them to respond quickly when a crisis does occur and test these plans. This plan will lay out procedures and activities that public leaders should undertake to ensure effective crisis communication when a crisis does occur."

Before Crisis Checklist

Develop crisis communication plans.
- Understand legal frameworks.
- Set communication goals.
- Identify stakeholders.
- Identify target audiences.
- Identify communication channels.
- Engage citizens and communities.
- Map common challenges.
- Prepare messaging content.
- Create checklists.

Conduct trainings and exercises.

3.1   Develop crisis communication plans

A crisis communication plan will guide all crisis communication activities that public leaders undertake, making communication smoother and faster during crises. Public leaders must insist that a crisis communication plan be developed before a crisis, as these plans will support their organization with the approach and tools in place, ready to respond quickly when a crisis occurs. The following checklist provides public leaders with an overview of the different activities that can be undertaken to prepare their crisis communication plan and approach:

- Understand relevant legal frameworks.

- Set crisis communication goals.

- Identify stakeholders.

- Identify target audiences and understand messaging needs.

- Identify communication channels.

- Engage citizens and communities to understand their needs.

- Map common challenges based on past experiences.

- Prepare messaging content.

- Create checklists and processes.

The following sections will expand upon these activities and provide guidance on integrating democratic principles into all activities in the crisis communication plan. Public leaders can browse the following documents to gather guidance on and examples of existing crisis communication plans:

- **National Mining Association, USA crisis communication template**

- **City of Sequim crisis communication plan**

- **Government of South Africa plan template**

- **U.K. Government Communication Service, Emergency Planning Framework**

If public leaders have crisis communication plans already created, public leaders should look at when they were last updated, and cross-check these recommendations against the systems that are currently in place. Additionally, public leaders should look for places to integrate the democratic principles into their existing plans.

3.1.1 Understand legal frameworks

While preparing for effective crisis communication, public leaders must first determine what legal frameworks are currently in place. This includes both frameworks regarding disaster management specifically as well as other relevant frameworks that are important to be communicated to the public during a crisis.

3.1.1.a Legal frameworks governing crisis management

Developing the crisis communication plan requires an understanding of the current legal frameworks that exist governing crisis management. Existing legal frameworks may define a crisis (legislation may define emergency or disaster in place of crisis) and describe the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders and the responsibilities of the different levels of government involved in a crisis. For example, depending on the legal framework, the leader of the crisis response could be the military, the ministry of information or communication, the national disaster management agency, or the president or prime minister's spokesperson. See Box 2 below for an example of a definition of emergency from the Civil Contingencies Act 2004 in the United Kingdom.

Box 2:   Defining "emergency"

In the United Kingdom Civil Contingencies Act (2004), emergency is defined in place of disaster or crisis. Emergency is defined as:

 a. an event or situation which threatens serious damage to human welfare in a place in the United Kingdom,

 b. an event or situation that threatens serious damage to the environment of a place in the United Kingdom, or

 c. war, or terrorism, which threatens serious damage to the security of the United Kingdom.

This definition is used to determine when crisis legislation is activated and applicable.

Determining the existing laws and regulations that govern the crisis response will support public leaders in understanding their own roles and the roles of different organizations in the crisis response, including their roles in communicating with the public about the crisis. Box 3 provides an example of the specific laws for disaster response in North Macedonia that outlines which actors should be involved and their responsibilities.

Box 3:   Example of existing legal framework

The legal framework for North Macedonia details what each actor is responsible for in a crisis situation (**Republic of Macedonia 2016**). For example, under this legal framework, the city of Skopje is responsible for:

 ▸ monitoring crises

 ▸ assessing threats that may lead to crises

 ▸ leading the recovery process following crises

 ▸ determining funding for crisis response

If a detailed framework has not yet been created, public leaders can use the following questions to start the process:

▸ What is your ministry/agency/department typically responsible for?

▸ In previous crises, what have been the communication responsibilities of your ministry/agency/department?

▸ How does your ministry/agency/department cooperate or work with other positions in the government?

▸ In terms of communication, who needs to sign off on outputs? Is there another organization that needs to be involved?

▸ What level of coordination with other ministries/agencies/departments is required?

3.1.1.b Other relevant legal frameworks

Public leaders should also make efforts to understand other legal frameworks that could be relevant during a crisis so they are prepared to communicate these laws and protections to the public. Below are a few examples of regulations and laws that may be relevant for public leaders' communication to the public and why:

▸ Banking regulations – Many countries have regulations on the banking sector to ensure that consumers' money is safe. Communicating these regulations will provide some confidence that banking will still be available and may help prevent panicked withdrawals.

▸ Anti-gouging laws – Several countries implemented regulations to limit the ability of stores to raise prices in an extreme way (i.e., more than 10 percent) during a crisis (Byun & Yi 2024). Public leaders should have a plan in place to communicate these laws to ensure that citizens are not being taken advantage of by fraudulent businesses.

▸ Scam protection – Some countries will have regulations or strategies in place to protect individuals from scams and develop protections for those who have been scammed. Scams commonly occur online – via email or social media – and on phones and can cause serious financial damage to individuals. Scams will most likely be prevalent during and after a crisis as people are more vulnerable.

Communicating these laws to the public before the start of a crisis will improve trust in the government and reduce concerns about the impacts of a crisis.

3.1.2 Set crisis communication goals

Setting crisis communication goals involves public leaders identifying what they wish to accomplish with the crisis communication at different stages of the crisis. During each phase, different goals may be more relevant and have different priorities. For example, pre-crisis, the goal may be to inform stakeholders and raise awareness of a risk or threat and how citizens can access information during a crisis. Another goal before a crisis should be to establish principles to guide communication during a crisis and identify common messages. During the crisis, the goal may focus on guiding appropriate behaviors and risk management actions. Post-crisis and during the recovery, goals may center on increasing societal cohesion and stability and how citizens can access support services. The different crisis communication goals should be recorded in the plan so that key stakeholders understand what needs to be accomplished and why. Figure 2 below highlights the different goals at different phases of a crisis.

Crisis Communication Goals

Setting goals for each stage of crisis communication can provide overall structure and guidance to crisis communication activities.

BEFORE CRISIS	BEFORE CRISIS	AFTER CRISIS
POTENTIAL GOALS • Inform stakeholders • Raise awareness of risks and threats • Determine how citizens access information • Set key principles to guide content • Develop common messages	**POTENTIAL GOALS** • Provide guidance on appropriate behavior • Inform on crisis management activities • Engage stakeholders	**POTENTIAL GOALS** • Increase societal cohesion • Provide information for citizens to access support materials

Figure 2: Crisis communication goals

3.1.3 Identify stakeholders

Managing crisis communication requires public leaders to identify the different stakeholders so that they understand their roles and responsibilities and, importantly, how they will help shape the crisis response and crisis communication with the public. This will help ensure that crisis communication roles are clear and that communication content is accurate. Public leaders should use the identification of stakeholders as an opportunity to:

▸ Clarify the responsibilities and mandates of different individuals and groups involved.

▸ Understand the decision-making processes.

▸ Determine existing hierarchies.

The legal frameworks will determine some of the stakeholders involved, which could change depending on the type and severity of the crisis. For example, the ministry of health may lead in a health crisis, while it may not be as involved in an economic crisis. As the next sections outline, stakeholders will include those in government at different levels and those external to government.

Additionally, the plan should make clear the role and responsibilities of each stakeholder in terms of incorporating the democratic principles outlined above (transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability). For example, to improve transparency and information integrity, the United States Department of State has a spokesperson who holds daily briefings to provide as much information as possible about ongoing crisis management and activities around the globe.

To do this effectively, public leaders should hold conversations and meetings with the identified stakeholders as the plan develops. Conservations can also occur through working groups with all stakeholders involved. These meetings will ensure that all potential stakeholders that will be involved in crisis communication activities understand their specific roles during different crises and which crises their roles will be required for.

3.1.3.a Government stakeholders' roles and responsibilities

Each government will structure its crisis communication differently, but most will have a designated team or department that focuses on communication during a crisis. Governments may have different structures and different units involved in crisis communication teams, but most will follow a chain of command, with an executive-led communication team taking the lead. Under executive leadership, different distinct roles will emerge, such as information gathering, message development, press teams, citizen engagement teams and other stakeholders. See a simplified example of this structure below (Figure 3) related to crisis communication at the national level.

Crisis Communication Team Structures

Command structures will vary across different contexts, the below is an example of a common command structure, the stakeholders involved and their relationships as decision makers.

Executive Level	President's spokesperson
Operational Command	President's spokesperson
Crisis Comms Activities	Information gathering	Message development	Citizen involvement	Media and press team

Figure 3: Example of a communication team chain of command

Government stakeholders involved in crisis communication may change depending on the nature of the crisis, including the expertise required, the complexity of the response and the speed of onset. For example, health crises will require the expertise of different stakeholders than those responding to natural hazard crises or social crises. Involving the correct government stakeholders with the right expertise will enhance information integrity and transparency in crisis communication. Figure 4 provides examples of the government stakeholders that would potentially be involved in communication teams for different crises.

Government stakeholders across crises

Government stakeholder involvement will vary according to the crisis; below are examples of the different government stakeholders that could be involved in different types of crises.

Health Crisis – Pandemic	Natural Hazard – Heavy rain even resulting in floods	Social Crisis – Energy costs rising during winter due to fuel shortages
• Executive: spokesperson for the President / Prime Minister • Ministries: Health, Finance, Customs / Borders • National civil protection • Lead scientist /national • institute of health if separate from health ministry • Military / National guard	• Executive: spokesperson for the President / Prime Minister • Ministries: Environment, • Housing, Finance • Military • National civil protection / Federal emergency management • Weather service (if separate from Environment agency) • Insurance representatives	• Executive: spokesperson for the President / Prime Minister • Ministries: Finance, Energy • National civil protection / Federal emergency management

Figure 4: Examples of government stakeholders

In understanding different governmental roles and responsibilities, public leaders should also examine what roles will not be required during a crisis and what new roles will be necessary. Box 4 outlines the considerations that should be made in the preparedness phase to plan for these potential changes.

Box 4: "Maximizing your people"

During an emergency or crisis, some traditional government roles may not be as essential as they would be at times of normal functioning. For example, tax auditors may not be needed in their traditional role during a crisis. During the preparedness phase, the communication team or the crisis response team should identify the roles that may not be immediately necessary and what new, additional roles will be needed during a crisis. These could include operating call centers or monitoring public sentiment. Anticipating the extra support needs should be a key part of crisis communication preparation. There are several things for public leaders to consider when determining roles for government employees:

▸ Know their jobs – Every public servant should understand what their specific roles will be during a crisis. Will they be actively communicating with the public or working in the background gathering information? Will they be working in a team or alone? Who will they be reporting to, and which other teams will they need to communicate with? Addressing these questions will allow each individual to understand their role and the exact activities they must undertake during a crisis. Public leaders should ensure that this work is done while preparing for crises.

▸ Anticipate support needs – In addition to knowing all the roles that will be filled during a crisis, public leaders must determine the need for additional support from staff outside of the crisis communication team. This could be additional staff to monitor phones or staff to reach community members impacted by the crisis.

▸ Plan for reallocation – After identifying the additional needs that may occur during a crisis, public leaders should have a plan in place and agreements with other departments/agencies to reallocate necessary staff during a crisis. This should include training for the reallocated staff members.

3.1.3.b Stakeholder mapping tips for public leaders

Public leaders should determine the roles of the different government stakeholders in different crises as well as where they fit in the chain of command to better define how they can integrate democratic principles into crisis communication while fitting into the current stakeholder structure. Public leaders should use this examination of government stakeholders to consider the following:

▸ The key stakeholders: Public leaders should determine who in each of the agencies/ministries/departments will be the contact point or communicator.

▸ Their role: Determining the roles of different government stakeholders will allow public leaders to situate their own role in the system as a whole.

▸ Changes throughout the lifespan of a crisis: Stakeholders that need to be involved will change throughout the lifespan of a crisis. Public leaders should understand this landscape and have a plan for changing stakeholders as a crisis evolves.

▸ Democratic principles: Understanding the roles of different government stakeholders will allow public leaders to determine who will be best placed to enact the different principles.

Box 5 highlights the importance of context in determining the stakeholders involved in crisis communication.

Box 5: Understanding the impact of context – Ebola and COVID-19 in Liberia

When considering which government stakeholders to involve in crisis communication, public leaders need to consider the context in which the crisis occurs. Understanding context will help leaders determine the best stakeholders to involve and how the context may impact citizen response.

For example, consider the COVID-19 pandemic in Liberia. Before the outbreak of that pandemic, Liberia suffered a terrible outbreak of Ebola, which killed thousands. The response of the Liberian government to the initial outbreak of Ebola was viewed by some as being flawed, contributing to a lack of trust in the government for health-related crises. This impacted the COVID-19 response, as some citizens did not trust information coming from the government (Miller 2020).

To combat contextual issues, public leaders could consider doing the following:

▸ Express flaws in previous responses and highlight changes: If there is a previous experience with a similar crisis, public leaders should acknowledge where mistakes were made in the previous response and highlight changes that were made following past crises.

▸ Bring out credible experts early: If government officials were involved in a previous crisis that led to a lack of trust, they may lack credibility with the public to address the current crisis. If this is the case, more trusted or credible experts should be front and center in crisis communication activities.

▸ Change stakeholders throughout the lifespan of a crisis: As mentioned above, the government stakeholders involved will need to change as the crisis evolves. This should be considered in the context of the country and crisis, as previous responses may impact which stakeholders will be involved throughout the crisis response.

3.1.3.c Engage with local leaders

Crises will impact public leaders at all levels of government. Therefore, different stakeholders at the local and national levels should be identified, and both should be integrated into crisis communication plans. Due to their proximity, local governments will typically have a better understanding of their citizens' needs and capacities to respond, their perceptions of government and their reactions to different policies and actions. Local leaders will typically feel the most immediate impacts of any crisis, and they will have to make many of the decisions that will impact citizens most immediately. Where possible, local leaders should be the ones leading crisis response due to their proximity and understanding and should therefore take ownership of local crisis communications because of their role in crisis response, ensuring alignment with any national communication efforts. Preparing for crisis communication should involve determining the responsibilities of local and national public leaders.

National leaders should partner with and support local leaders to best understand local impacts. Developing local partnerships is an opportunity to establish relationships and communication lines before a crisis that can be called upon when needed. Public leaders can build these partnerships to:

▸ Provide the information necessary to localize the national response.

▸ Provide local governments and officials with training and insights into improved local disaster management and crisis communication practices, which can improve information integrity.

- Develop information intermediaries between citizens and national governments by communicating local knowledge and sentiment nationally.

- Elevate citizens' voices in national decision-making and collaborate closely with civil society organizations, increasing responsiveness and inclusion.

- Localize crisis communication and crisis response.

The roles that national and local governments will play in crisis response and crisis communication should be outlined in the crisis communication plan. Determining these roles and explicitly outlining responsibilities before a crisis will reduce confusion and the potential for inconsistent messages from local and national governments during a crisis.

3.1.3.d External stakeholders
In addition to national government stakeholders, public leaders need to involve other stakeholders outside of government in crisis communication planning to ensure:

- Different viewpoints are heard, increasing inclusion.

- Gaps in knowledge are addressed, increasing information integrity.

- Information can be spread through different external stakeholder channels, increasing accessibility and transparency.

External stakeholders to engage with include representatives of associations and organizations, including CSOs that will provide the citizen perspective and an understanding of the needs of the citizens that they represent. Public leaders should engage with CSOs with the aim to:

- Include their insights into pre-crisis preparedness and planning.

- Review prepared messaging to give feedback on how certain groups may respond and perceive messaging.

- Gather their insights during exercises, trainings and scenario planning.

CSOs will represent groups that may be more vulnerable in a crisis (e.g., persons with disabilities) and may provide tailored, inclusive and accessible information to their communities. Public leaders can partner with a wide array of CSOs to ensure inclusion and accessibility, such as women's groups and associations; youth unions; student associations; religious institutions and faith-based associations; and social, environmental and human rights movements (GPPAC 2007).

The expertise of academics, researchers and subject matter experts (e.g., epidemiologists, flood modelers) can also be drawn on to inform what is being communicated to the public. Additionally, the private sector, such as insurance companies or infrastructure providers, and even companies supplying daily subsistence to consumers, such as grocery stores and gas stations, can be important stakeholders to involve in the process. The experts who will be relevant to the planning and response will be based on the type of crisis. Public leaders should understand and be in contact with these stakeholders before a crisis manifests.

Engaging external private stakeholders, such as representatives from telecommunication companies and social media platforms, should be a priority of public leaders. This can help them understand the intricacies of different communication channels, where the services are lacking, and the alternatives if some communication channels go down during a crisis. Having this information can be used by public leaders to enhance the communication plan. In addition to having a plan for when communication channels go down due to a crisis, public leaders should strive to keep all channels open. Governments should not curtail freedom of expression by limiting citizens' access to social media platforms or otherwise "shutting down" the internet.

Figure 5 outlines the steps that can be taken to effectively identify, contact and engage external stakeholders (Ndlela 2018):

Engaging external stakeholders in crisis communication

While each crises will involve different external experts, the following is an example of the process that can be followed to involve these stakeholders.

Identify important stakeholders.

Prioritise involvement of different stakeholders.

Identify communication channels with stakeholders.

Create contact lists.

Identify engagement activities for different stakeholders.

Establish feedback mechanisms.

Figure 5: Steps to engage external stakeholders

3.1.4   Identify target audiences and understand messaging needs

Recognizing that there are significant inequalities in society can help shape an effective crisis communication response. Public leaders should pay attention to how the content and form of their crisis communication will reach and impact different communities. Crises often exacerbate existing inequalities and vulnerabilities for marginalized groups, including women, youth, older people, people with disabilities, and socioeconomically disadvantaged groups, among others. Lack of inclusion and political marginalization can increase the vulnerability and impacts of a crisis on these groups. Public leaders have the opportunity to consider inclusion and accessibility in the crisis communication strategy before crises by doing the following:

▸   Identify how different marginalized communities will be impacted by different crises and assess their unique needs during these crises.

▸   Research how to develop effective messages that are responsive to the specific needs of marginalized groups.

▸   Create relationships and partnerships with groups and networks representing marginalized populations.

▸   Determine which communication channels and methods will most effectively reach different marginalized groups.

▸   Provide opportunities for members of different marginalized communities to participate in the design and implementation of crisis communication strategies.

▸   Apply an intersectional lens to ensure that crisis communication strategies intentionally reach those furthest behind. This lens is useful because, while members of marginalized groups may share common barriers that inhibit their participation, there are also variations in age, socioeconomic status, gender or geography that can pose additional challenges.

The Regional Risk Communication and Community Engagement (n.d.) working group for Asia and the Pacific produced a report that can be used as an example for considering marginalized groups in crisis communication and developing targeted communication based on the unique needs of these communities.

Ultimately, to reach all segments of society, crisis communication will need to be tailored to the needs of different groups. Inclusive crisis communication can enable improved dialogue with citizens currently missing in democratic processes, ultimately leading to the involvement of all citizens in decision-making and participatory democracy. More specific tools can be used to help public leaders identify target audiences. For example, the following checklist (Figure 6) provides an overview of the different aspects to consider when determining how to understand the needs of and communicate with different marginalized groups:

Target audiences and messaging needs

To ensure that all audiences will receive and understand crisis communication messaging, work needs to be done to understand different target audiences and their specific communication needs during a crisis.

Target audience for communications

- [ ] 1. Conduct research into which marginalized groups will be most impacted by different crises.
- [ ] 2. Reach out to representatives of marginalized groups to discuss crisis impacts before, during and after crises.
- [ ] 3. Determine which marginalized groups should be focused on in your area (this will depend on the crisis type and characteristics of your area. The categories below are not exclusive, and other groups should also be considered.)
    - [ ] a. Age
    - [ ] b. Gender
    - [ ] c. Socioeconomic status
    - [ ] d. Education
    - [ ] e. Location (rural vs. urban)
- [ ] 4. Research different communication channels used by different marginalized groups.

Messaging needs

- [ ] 1. Conduct research (or contract this research) to determine how different marginalized groups best receive and access communication.
- [ ] 2. Examine languages spoken by marginalized groups.
- [ ] 3. Consider literacy rates in communication and provide options for those who cannot read.
- [ ] 4. This may include providing communications in multiple accessible formats, including audio, video, Braille, Easy Read, sign language.
- [ ] 5. Ensure messaging is applicable to all (i.e., consider whether advice is feasible for those with lower socioeconomic status).
- [ ] 6. Include gender perspectives in communication.
    - [ ] a. Communicate on channels that are used by diverse segments of the population, including, but not limited to:
    - [ ] b. Young people/children
    - [ ] c. Older people
    - [ ] d. Immigrants
    - [ ] e. Other

Intersectionality

- [ ] 1. Make sure marginalized groups that may intersect, such as low-income women, are considered.

Figure 6: Sample inclusive communication checklist

Marginalized communities may also include other individuals not included on the checklist above. Specific crises may also have more pronounced impacts on certain groups. For example:

- In a heatwave, older people and children are often most at risk and therefore may require targeted messaging.

- If fuel shortages are going to occur over the winter months, lower socioeconomic groups should be prioritized by crisis communications since they may experience heightened risks.

Box 6 provides examples of different inclusion strategies to consider in crisis communication.

Box 6: Examples of inclusion strategies in crisis communication

- In Moldova, approximately 20 percent of the population speaks Russian as a first language. While they may have a grasp of Romanian, the majority's language, crisis communication that needs to be disseminated quickly and easily understood should also be available in Russian so that this group can access it.

- In the Gambia, due to low literacy rates, especially among rural women, crisis communications need to be disseminated in ways that are understandable and accessible to people with low literacy. If information is distributed via flyer or leaflet, it must also be distributed using pictographs or video posts on social media. Materials can also be provided in "Easy Read" formats, which combine short sentences that are clear and free of jargon with simple images to help explain the written content. Easy Read benefits people with low literacy levels, those who may not speak a majority language, people with disabilities and those experiencing memory problems.

Considering the key information that needs to be communicated to different audiences before, during and after the crisis enables message templates to be prepared before the crisis occurs. These templates should be developed in partnership with members of marginalized communities, who can provide valuable advice and guidance on their design. The developed messages should be based on the goals relevant to each crisis phase and include the specific actions that different stakeholders need to take. Before the crisis, it is important to consider the target audience to ensure that messages are accessible to and can be easily understood by that audience (Anson et al. 2021).

Developing inclusive communication practices *prior* to a crisis will ensure that communication is more available and accessible to everyone during a crisis. The following schema details recommendations for public leaders to ensure that crisis communication does not leave anyone behind or exacerbate existing inequalities:

Engaging communities and understanding marginalized groups

To develop a communication plan for marginalized groups during a crisis, the following work needs to be done to build trust with these communities and understand their specific communication needs.

Understand existing inequalities: Things to think about	• What inequalities currently exist in your area? • What has happened in the past regarding marginalized groups during crises? • What is your relationship with different marginalized groups? • How much trust exists between leaders and these marginalized groups?	**Understand existing inequalities: Things to do**	• Conduct research to understand different inequalities in the local area. • Have conversations with representatives of marginalized groups to understand their needs. • Connect with local leaders who have a good understanding of the community.
Determine specific needs: Things to think about	• What do these inequalities mean for disaster response? • What specific needs will be different during crises? • How can leaders accommodate these needs? • Do these communities trust leaders to address these needs?	**Determine specific needs: Things to do**	• Have discussion with communities about their specific needs during disasters. • Understand limitations of current practices. • Conduct research on specific communication needs of different groups. • Determine the channels that different marginalized groups use.
Engage stakeholders: Things to think about	• Who are the visible representatives of these groups? • How well do they represent the entirety of the groups needs? • Is there anyone else that should be contacted to fully understand these needs? • How can you best contact these stakeholders when developing crisis communication?	**Engage stakeholders: Things to do**	• Determine who should be brought into advise on crisis communication practices. • Develop a list of stakeholders, including contact information, that can be called upon during crisis. • Engage stakeholders to review communication and determine the best channels to use for different marginalized groups.
Develop messaging: Things to think about	• What are the best channels to use to reach different marginalized groups? • What languages do messages need to be disseminated in? • Will marginalized groups trust information coming from the government? • Can different stakeholders be used to disseminate messaging?	**Develop messaging: Things to do**	• Synthesize research to tailor messaging to different marginalized groups. • Develop messages in the different, most prevalent languages, in the community. • Engage stakeholders to disseminate messaging.

Figure 7: Schema for inclusive risk communication

3.1.5 Identify communication channels

Public leaders need reliable communication channels to reach relevant governmental and external stakeholders, as well as the public, during a crisis. Identifying and establishing these channels before a crisis can assist public leaders in understanding what communication channels will be available during the crisis, which can increase information integrity and transparency. Communication channels include both internal intergovernmental and external channels to communicate with citizens.

3.1.5.a Establish internal intergovernmental communication channels

Internal government communication channels can take many forms but act as ways for different departments or agencies to communicate information with each other so that all departments are acting with the full set of facts. Box 7 below provides an example of the communication channels in Italy. For public leaders, establishing communication channels within the government will ensure:

- All government departments receive relevant information

- All departments have an understanding of the crisis and government response

- Consistency in the crisis communication messaging from different agencies/departments/ministries

- Communication and coordination between public leaders and relevant internal stakeholders

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**Box 7:   Example of communication channels –
Italy's Civil Protection Operational Committee**

Italy provides an interesting example of intergovernmental communication while also including external stakeholders in this collaborative crisis response. The Operational Committee (OC) of the Italian Department of Civil Protection (DCP) illustrates an organizational approach to create consensus among different stakeholders. It comprises representatives from the national civil protection agencies, including the DCP, the armed forces, the fire department, police forces, the Italian Red Cross, the National Health Service, voluntary organizations, and technical and scientific agencies. The Committee ensures inter-governmental coordination for decision-making.

The OC meets when the head of the DCP determines it is necessary. To communicate with all stakeholders, the OC has developed a technical and communication system to keep pertinent information online and to provide an integrated picture of unfolding events for all stakeholders. The Committee also disseminates emergency information to alert immediately and activate the different structures of the National Civil Protection Service. Connections can also be established, through a secure system, between the OC and the civil protection operational rooms of affected regions or with critical infrastructure providers (Baubion 2013).

3.1.5.b External communication channels

External communication channels consist of the different means that public leaders use to communicate crisis information to citizens. Before a crisis, public leaders should map communication channels and understand how citizens access information from the government. This will enable public leaders to disseminate crisis communication in an inclusive and accessible way during crises. Each country/region will have different media infrastructure and media landscapes that will include the following channels:

Mass media

These channels tend to have a broad reach across a large region or country and include television, national radio, newspapers, magazines, websites and billboards. The type of mass media in question is an important consideration when thinking about communicating democratically. Depending on the country, there will be differing levels of state control over the media, from full control to partial influence to limited control. Democratic communication should ensure media outlets have editorial independence and focus on the mass media to enhance transparency and information integrity and limit the influence of bias on the communication.

Public leaders should build relationships with mass media before a crisis so that they can develop plans to use media to:

- Share warnings and forecasts – Partnerships with the media can help public leaders spread warning messages and update forecasts for natural hazards, including evacuation warnings.

- Air press conferences during crisis response – In partnering with mass media, public leaders can increase accessibility and transparency by widely sharing their press conferences.

- Hold emergency broadcasts – Partnering with the media can assist public leaders in quickly disseminating information during emergencies.

To spread the crisis communication messaging as wide as possible, public leaders can develop partnerships with both national and local media outlets before a crisis to ensure they have the contacts in place. Box 8 highlights some key tips for planning communication with the media.

Box 8: Centralizing government communication and information dissemination

During a crisis, communication and information coming from the government should be as centralized as possible so that there is one place where people needing updates, including the media, government employees and citizens, can go to for the most up-to-date status of the crisis. If the crisis is national, the communication center should be located with the central government, with coordinated inputs from local leaders. If the crisis is localized, the reverse could be applied. Centralizing information through one locus better enables prescriptive information content by public leaders, improving information integrity and accessibility during a crisis.

Centralizing communication: Before a crisis, a plan should be made for a central place for disseminating information about the crisis as it unfolds. This could be a newly created webpage, or a webpage of one of the ministries in charge, but all information should be up to date on this website. Additionally, there should be one agency in charge of a regular press briefing so that the information about a crisis is disseminated from one place.

Prescriptive dissemination: Before a crisis, public leaders should ensure that plans are in place so that communication is as prescriptive as possible during a crisis. This means having plans to hold press conferences or release information at predefined intervals and to reliably meet these agreed timings. For example, at the start of the crisis, the government may decide to hold a press conference every day at 14:00. This will serve two purposes in improving crisis communication. First, it will show citizens that public leaders are working on addressing the crisis and are being as transparent as possible. Second, it will give the media a better idea of when new information will be available and allow them to prepare to disseminate this information on their networks.

Social media

Social media is now widely used worldwide, making it an effective way to communicate with citizens. Social media tends to have a broad reach, can spread information quickly and includes platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and TikTok. To prepare for effective crisis communication, public leaders using social media have several considerations (CDC 2014; U.K. GCS 2020):

- Create social media accounts before a crisis.

- Use social media accounts for communication before a crisis to spread useful information on non-crisis-related government activities.

- Government accounts should be separate from an individual leader's personal account.

- Refrain from overtly political posts.

- Post in more than one language — the specific languages will depend on the most common languages spoken in an area, which is why it is important to understand messaging needs.

As media landscapes change and social media use becomes more prevalent, maintaining a presence on social media allows public leaders to communicate effectively with a large segment of the population, increasing transparency and information integrity. See Box 9 for an example of how social media plays a role in information integrity.

Box 9: Information integrity and social media

In developing a social media strategy for disseminating crisis communication, public leaders need to be aware of the information environment in their country. Monitoring social media can be a way for public leaders to understand if false information is spreading, which could help in designing a social media strategy. NDI produced a report that demonstrates an example of social media monitoring, where a program was established with the aims to (1) expose sources and patterns of information manipulation within traditional and new media and (2) develop fact-based counternarratives (**NDI n.d.**).

Organization and community groups

These channels reach a smaller, more targeted audience, such as association members or faith groups. Channels include community-based media, organization newsletters, meetings at houses of worship and other targeted community outreach (WHO 2017). These channels, more so than mass media, are more effective at disseminating information and guidance to a local audience. They allow for much more targeted, specific communication that applies to marginalized groups and local specifics.

Public leaders should make efforts to create partnerships with these organizations and community groups to help spread government messaging to targeted audiences. This can be accomplished by partnering with external stakeholders. Box 10 provides an example of understanding citizens' media use in Burkina Faso.

Box 10: Researching communication culture and media landscapes

Research can be conducted into how citizens receive and send information. This research will include desk reviews and interviews with media organizations, media experts, academic researchers, humanitarian agencies and CSOs. An example of this research in Burkina Faso highlights the communication culture, media landscape and barriers to access (**CDAC Network 2022a**).

By conducting this research, public leaders and their staff can help improve inclusion, accessibility and information integrity, as accurate information will reach citizens using suitable methods.

3.1.6 Engage citizens and communities to understand their needs

Before a crisis, public leaders should establish mechanisms to engage directly with citizens. These mechanisms will assist public leaders in establishing relationships with citizens before a crisis that can be drawn on when a crisis occurs and allow for enhanced inclusion and government responsiveness.

Directly engaging with citizens and communities enables public leaders to understand their target audiences and design crisis communication that fits their information needs. This two-way communication is essential for building citizen trust in the government and allowing public leaders to better understand their communication needs, which can improve the responsiveness, inclusion and accessibility of crisis communication. Engaging citizens can also improve accountability of public leaders. Conducting these activities before a crisis occurs will ensure the relationships and learnings are in place when a crisis occurs. This engagement should take place at the local level and be led by local public leaders, with the information gathered and then shared with national public leaders to improve communication practices throughout government.

> "Directly engaging with citizens and communities enables public leaders to understand their target audiences and design crisis communication that fits their information needs. This two-way communication is essential for building citizen trust in the government and allowing public leaders to better understand their communication needs, which can improve the responsiveness, inclusion and accessibility of crisis communication."

Public authorities can engage citizens before a crisis through a variety of methods. Some of these methods are outlined in the next sections, with a focus on a feedback loop methodology that can be used to:

- Engage citizens in local government decision-making processes.

- Develop greater transparency between government and citizens surrounding decision-making.

- Provide a platform for citizens to voice their needs and concerns.

- Increase trust in the local government.

- Understand marginalized groups and their specific needs (see Box 9).

- Understand the most common communication channels that are used as well as citizens' knowledge of how to respond to crises.

Figure 8 below outlines the steps of the feedback loop methodology, with a specific focus on how the methodology can be used to better understand communication channels, communication needs and how to prepare for crises:

Feedback loops for crisis communication

While the feedback loop process is not commonly used to prepare for crisis communication, the following represents an example of how the current process could be tailored for a crisis communication focus.

Develop local government partners who are interested in improving crisis communication to help design and distribute questionnaires.	Develop questionnaires with local government partners on how people receive information, community make-up, communication channels used, etc.	Distribute questionnaires face to face with individuals in the community; establish a connection with citizens.
Collect questionnaires from community members; this is another opportunity to build connections.	Use the information gathered to better understand the communication landscape and develop communication plans.	Share the crisis communication plan with the community to gather their feedback and show that their data was used and their responses considered.

Figure 8: Feedback loop method with a focus on crisis communication

Public leaders can use the feedback loop method to build trust with citizens before a crisis occurs, understand communication channels that are used within the population and assess different vulnerabilities and capabilities in the local area. Feedback loops enable leaders to gather information at regular intervals and develop relationships before a crisis occurs to inform the crisis response and develop crisis communication practices that are more inclusive and accessible to all citizens. Information gained from the feedback loop process should be integrated into crisis communication plans. Box 11 highlights an example of information gathered during a feedback loop exercise in Moldova and how it can apply to crisis communication.

Box 11:   Using feedback loops to understand diverse communities in Moldova

In Moldova, NDI has supported local officials in the development and implementation of feedback loop methods for 10 years through different iterations, including using the method to understand the needs and issues of diverse groups.

On one occasion, the feedback loop method was used to understand the needs of the Roma population and Russian speakers in several small towns. There was a lack of trust within the Roma community of the local public leaders; therefore, local leaders worked with Roma leaders to gain trust. Questions were asked of Roma households to determine what their needs and biggest issues were. Similar questions were asked of Russian speakers to determine their priorities and how they might differ from Romanian speakers.

During crises, the information gathered from these feedback loops can be used to understand how to best access diverse communities and which community leaders should be engaged as crisis communication intermediaries. The trust gained through prior contact will also assist in spreading crisis messaging.

Feedback loops also serve to enhance responsiveness of public leaders as they provide a platform to gather information on citizens' opinions and provide a mechanism to incorporate these opinions into government plans and activities.

For national-level public leaders, partnerships with local leaders are important, as they will have access to the information gained on citizens' needs at a local level. Figure 9 provides information on the benefits and challenges associated with the feedback loop method.

Benefits and challenges of using feedback loops

While organization and implementation can prove challenging, there are numerous benefits to engaging with citizens and developing two-way communication.

Benefits

- Opportunity to introduce two-way communication practices into crisis communication and preparedness.
- Builds trust and understanding with citizens, which takes time to establish.
- Can be used to understand local priorities and capacities.
- Allows leaders to explain their constraints and what they are able to manage within their budget.
- Provides leaders face to face contact with citizens, which can create a productive dialogue.

Challenges

- Requires a lot of effort and manpower from local leaders.
- Hard to action on the national level due to distance from citizens and local communities.

Figure 9: Benefits and challenges of feedback loop methodology

3.1.6.a Frameworks for citizen engagement in crisis communication-feedback loops in practice

Fiji has developed a framework to engage citizens, which can be used to provide a starting point for public leaders to begin their own engagement process, similar to the feedback loop method. These methods provide a good structure for how public leaders can use citizen engagement efforts to integrate inputs from citizens into crisis communication and develop more fully realized two-way communication practices. Box 12 provides more detail on Fiji's community engagement work.

Box 12:   Fiji's communication and citizen engagement framework

Fiji's National Disaster Management Office, along with partners such as UNICEF and Ground Truth Solutions, has developed a framework that integrates citizens' voices into their disaster response mechanisms. When executed properly, these collaborations between individuals facing crises and the many organizations working to support them can improve crisis communication practices and crisis response from public leaders. With clear, consistent messaging, content that is trusted, relevant and actionable, community members can make informed choices and work in concert with crisis responders (**CDAC Network 2022b**). Public leaders can use these frameworks as a guide to integrate citizens' voices into their specific governance and communication contexts.

Fiji's framework includes three stages to enable a cycle of engagement:

1. Plan and adapt: During the planning stage, a collaborative structure should be established so that partnerships are developed and structures are put into place. Active engagement should begin in this stage.

2. Communicate: This stage involves talking with communities, including sustaining consistent messaging that is trusted, clear and accessible, reaching all groups in society.

3. Listen: The final stage is listening to communities, where governments should listen to a diverse group of people to receive feedback on activities and adapt strategies accordingly.

3.1.6.b Citizen engagement via technical tools
Technical tools developed for participatory democracy can also be used by public leaders to understand the priority issues for citizens and the crisis preparedness landscape in places with good internet participation. These tools should be deployed before a crisis occurs to engage citizens, build relationships and demonstrate responsiveness as an important principle in crisis communication before a crisis. Online participatory democracy tools that public leaders can adopt to engage with citizens include:

‣   **Decidim**: an open-sourced platform to enhance citizen engagement

‣   **CitizenOS**: a platform to facilitate conversations around a specific topic

‣   **Stanford Online Deliberation Platform**: a video-conferencing tool to moderate discussions

‣   **Pol.is**: a sentiment analysis tool for large group settings (**Smith 2023**)

These tools can be used to complement feedback loops, as they can have a wider reach than door-to-door canvassing. Public leaders can use these tools to:

- ▶ Further integrate citizens' views into their crisis communication plans.

- ▶ Understand issues that citizens have with current communication channels/messaging.

- ▶ Gather opinions on how to improve crisis communication practices.

- ▶ Enhance responsiveness of public leaders.

3.1.7   Map common challenges and learnings from past crises

No crisis occurs in a vacuum; therefore, public leaders should understand the lessons learned from previous crises, map out common challenges that can hamper communication, and use those to enhance their communication plans going forward. Below are activities that public leaders should undertake to improve their crisis communication plans:

- ▶ Mapping common challenges – Each country will have specific challenges that should be understood when preparing crisis communication. For example, some countries may have regions with poor internet coverage or areas with high illiteracy rates. These challenges should be understood in advance by public leaders so that they are aware of issues that might be encountered during future crises and can establish plans to address the known challenges.

- ▶ Adapting to lessons learned – Public leaders who have conducted crisis communication for previous crises should ensure that their lessons from those crises are evaluated and any necessary changes to practices are incorporated into plans going forward.

3.1.8 Prepare messaging content

In preparing for a crisis, public leaders charged with crisis communication should prepare some general messaging that can be used in most crises. While the specifics will change, the principles that guide message development will remain the same, as will some general guidance.

- ▶ Principles that guide messaging – When designing message content, public leaders should consider the democratic principles in this guide and ensure that they are respected in the messaging that will be sent. Public leaders should focus on truth and transparency when developing the messaging plan. The public should receive the truth about what is happening in the crisis, even if the news is bad. For example, if the crisis is a financial system failure, public leaders should be upfront about the truth regarding what has occurred and provide information on what they are doing to fix it and what actions citizens can take.

- ▶ Common messages – Some messages can be developed in advance and used during most crises, as there will be actions that can be applied to most crises that will result in messages that should be created in advance. Developing these messages will help provide the public with a job to do. These are messages such as:

    - → "Always check on your neighbors during difficult times."

    - → "Expect disruptions to x, y, z services and have a plan."

    - → "Don't hoard goods."

3.1.9 Create checklists

Once public leaders have done the preparedness work in understanding the context, developing roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and engaging meaningfully with the community, the final aspect of creating these plans includes creating checklists to follow during a crisis. These checklists will assist public leaders in synthesizing all of the information gathered so that it is in an accessible format that is easy to follow when a crisis occurs.

Having the checklists and processes in place will allow public leaders to focus on the democratic principles, as they can be incorporated into the checklists. Additionally, having tasks that need to take place during a crisis laid out will allow for more organization during a crisis and therefore more time to consider how to better enhance the principles in crisis communication activities. Transparency and information integrity specifically will benefit from these checklists, as timing of communication and determining veracity of information should be included in any checklist. The **European Food Safety Organisation** (2023) has developed a checklist that public leaders can use as an example, which spells out specific crisis communication activities that need to be done as soon as a crisis occurs.

3.2   Develop and conduct crisis communication trainings and exercises

Once the crisis communication plans have been developed, public leaders should mandate that trainings and exercises be developed to test these plans. Training for staff and relevant stakeholders ensures that they know how to respond during a crisis and have the knowledge and skills to do so. Training should highlight the democratic principles to make sure they are considered before a crisis. Training can be in the form of crisis communication courses, workshops or exercises:

- ▶ Crisis communication courses – While some individuals in government are trained in crisis communication principles such as those listed above, it is likely that the majority of public leaders may not have specific training. Public leaders can contract experts or work with existing government experts to ensure any course highlights the democratic principles.

- ▶ Workshops – Workshops are a good way to work through and discuss the process of crisis communication within government and with external stakeholders. Public leaders can organize a workshop for their ministry/department to discuss the specifics of a crisis communication plan.

- ▶ Exercises – Exercises and scenarios are the best ways to test communication plans before a crisis. While conducting exercises, public leaders can integrate democratic principles into their responses.

Exercising the crisis communication plan and the outcomes of the above activities before a crisis provides an opportunity to identify and address any weaknesses and enables staff and major stakeholders to understand and be comfortable with their roles (Government Communication Service 2022). Where possible, messaging that is developed for the preparedness plan and the exercise should be tested. This testing should include gathering input from local government and citizen representatives as to the acceptability of these messages to local context and citizens. It is also possible to use large-scale events to exercise crisis communications. For instance, a festival or national day provides an opportunity to share information with large crowds about conduct and accessibility to manage media relationships and work with stakeholders at local and national levels. Box 13 provides an example of scenario testing in Germany.

Box 13:   Examples of large-scale scenario planning in Germany

Since 2004, Germany has conducted strategic crisis management exercises that follow an interagency and cross-disciplinary approach. These exercises involve participants from all sectors and political levels in plausible risk simulations. The exercises also focus on crisis information and communication and aim to attract media interest to foster awareness-raising. One of the essential benefits of these exercises comes from the post-exercise phase. Evaluation reports, based on expert observers' and participants' assessments, enable the identification of capabilities that need to be strengthened and contribute to further development or shifts in crisis management strategies and structures. Germany established the National Strategic Crisis Management Exercise (LUKEK), which takes place every two years, with the aim of raising awareness among top government officials. These exercises are an opportunity for training on cross-ministerial management and crisis response staff and include the participation of political authorities, relief organizations, scientific institutions, critical infrastructure operators and key service providers (Baubion 2013).

3.3   Preparedness phase: Summary

The preparedness phase is where public leaders should put in the work to ensure that crisis communication is conducted in a way that can enhance democratic principles and that the processes are in place should a crisis occur. Figure 10 below summarizes the do's and don'ts for public leaders in the preparedness phase.

Considerations when preparing for a crisis

Planning for a crisis will lead to public leaders that are more prepared when a crisis occurs. Below are several aspects to consider to make this planning as comprehensive as possible.

☑ **Understand key stakeholders:** Public leaders need a good understanding of who needs to be involved and who can be relied upon to assist in crisis communication.

☑ **Determine target groups:** Public leaders should understand how different crises will impact different groups to ensure appropriate communications.

☑ **Consider marginalized groups:** Marginalized groups could be the most impacted by crises, therefore public leaders need to consider their needs to ensure an appropriate response.

☑ **Understand communication channels:** Different target groups will have different channels where they access information, so to enhance democratic principles these channels need to be understood.

☑ **Conduct community outreach:** Public leaders should improve two-way communication wherever possible to ensure accountability and inclusivity.

☑ **Keep communicating:** Even when a crisis is not actively taking place, public leaders should communicate the ongoings of the government so that they can build trust and enhance transparency.

☒ **Ostracize the media:** The media are important partners in spreading crisis communication messages, so public leaders should maintain relationships with the media.

☒ **Discount the importance of building trust:** Citizens will react better to crisis communication if they trust information from the government, therefore public leaders should not ignore public trust.

☒ **Ignore marginalized groups:** A crisis response needs to consider the whole of society to be effective, so public leaders should not ignore the needs of different marginalized groups in communication.

☒ **Misunderstand roles and responsibilities:** A crisis will be hectic, so public leaders cannot afford to misunderstand their role in crisis communication. This has the potential to further complicate any response.

☒ **Discount democratic principles:** As demonstrated above, democratic principles are essential in providing effective communication. These need to be front and centre when planning a response.

Figure 10: Do's and don'ts in crisis communication

4. During crisis: Response

When a crisis occurs, public leaders, informed by their planning before the crisis, should produce communication that enhances democratic practice and builds trust in the government response. Box 14 provides examples of how the democratic principles can be applied during a crisis.

Box 14:   Democratic principles and communicating during a crisis:

Transparency: During a crisis, public leaders should share available information on crisis developments early and predictably. Information on the crisis should be shared through established channels such as press conferences, social media and mass media, in addition to any channels necessary to support inclusive communication. This focus on transparency during a crisis will help citizens to receive up-to-date information that they can act on.

Information Integrity: When a crisis occurs, governments should communicate with clear, reliable and accurate messaging so that the information on the crisis does not become confused. In addition, public leaders should monitor the information environment to address any false information that may be spreading and be prepared to provide messages that counteract misperceptions. The source and basis upon which information is provided should be easily traceable.

Inclusion: When a crisis occurs, public leaders should use the work done before a crisis to understand marginalized groups and provide inclusive communication about the crisis. This means ensuring that no one is left behind or forgotten when communicating about the crisis and that consideration is paid to marginalized groups such as older people, minority communities or the unhoused. Public leaders should remain alert to any "missed" communities during the preparedness phase that may need additional communications support.

Accessibility: While communicating during a crisis, public leaders need to develop communications that reach everyone equitably while being especially mindful of ensuring inclusive communications. This includes having sign language interpreters at news conferences, any official communication released in multiple languages and offline communication available for those without access to the internet.

Responsiveness: The channels established to provide feedback and responsiveness before a crisis should continue to operate and be engaged when a crisis occurs. This can include prioritizing feedback from civil society stakeholders (e.g., CSOs, community centers, faith groups) to ensure that there are avenues for citizens to discuss issues with the crisis response. To ensure responsiveness, public leaders need to not only gather feedback but also act on what feedback they can during the crisis phase.

Accountability: During a crisis, although public leaders may feel overwhelmed by the ongoing crisis, it is paramount that they demonstrate that they are accountable for their actions. This will facilitate an openness to scrutiny, even during a crisis, and should occur through the channels established before a crisis. Public leaders should also communicate this accountability to citizens so that they understand there are mechanisms to ensure responsibility for actions.

Public leaders can use the checklist below to inform their crisis communication during the crisis response:

During Crisis Checklist

☑ **Assess available information and activate the communication plan.**

☑ **Engage stakeholders.**

☑ **Develop and test messaging.**

☑ **Develop communication timelines.**

☑ **Disseminate messaging through communication channels.**
- Work with the media.
- Use social media.

During a crisis, crisis communication should be used to provide the public with as much accurate and timely information as possible, give recommendations on how to respond to the crisis, and share information as it changes. The sections below connect these goals with the core democratic principles of transparency and information integrity and provide context for the checklist above.

4.1 Assess available information and activate the crisis communication plan

The speed at which crises occur and unfold varies significantly, and early communication is essential to avoid an information vacuum. From the outset of a potential crisis being identified, it is important for public leaders to gather and assess all available information on what is currently known and understood to determine whether the situation is actually a crisis. This also involves determining what is not yet known. This information gathering will also help determine the initial messaging and improve transparency.

Whether the situation is classified as a crisis will likely be based on the information included in the legal frameworks outlined in the Before a crisis section (section 3). Consistent with the definition of a crisis in the introduction to this guidebook, **the Canadian Chamber of Commerce (2020)** identifies an incident as a crisis when the incident:

- Disrupts or interferes with normal day-to-day operations

- Poses a threat to people, property or organizational reputation

- Needs the attention or intervention of senior leadership

Once the incident has been classified as a crisis, the crisis communication plan developed in the previous phase, before a crisis, can be activated by public leaders. As discussed above, checklists are a way to spell out a step-by-step plan for communicating during a crisis. These checklists should be available as part of the activated plans, and all efforts to follow these checklists should be made.

Once the crisis communication plan has been activated, the team of stakeholders identified during the planning phase should be convened.

4.2 Engage stakeholders

Engaging with a team of stakeholders will support public leaders in establishing the facts of the crisis situation – what is known and unknown and what needs to be done to better understand the unknown aspects. During the preparedness phase, public leaders should have developed a list of stakeholders and their contact information to easily engage during a crisis. The team should include stakeholders and representatives of organizations with the expertise and knowledge required for the response. This will enhance trust in response, as shown in Box 15 below. The stakeholders who need to be engaged to understand the crisis and how to respond may include:

- Representatives from different government departments

- Local leaders

- First responders

- CSOs

- Academics and external experts

- Telecommunication operators

As a crisis will require quick responses, it is important that the stakeholders responsible for and involved in crisis communication clearly understand their roles and responsibilities and how they are linked to the roles and responsibilities of other stakeholders and organizations involved in the response.

In distinguishing the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders in a crisis, one important consideration in response is understanding the differences in roles between national and local leaders. These roles may be established in frameworks and regulations that exist regarding crisis communication, but all involved should ensure they have a clear understanding of these roles. Below are a few points for public leaders to consider when navigating these responsibilities during a crisis:

▸ Local leaders should be at the forefront of response: Wherever possible, according to the regulations, local leaders should take charge in a crisis, as they have the trust and understanding of local populations.

▸ National leaders should play a supporting role: If a crisis is large enough, local public leaders and actors may be overwhelmed and unable to adequately respond. Stepping in with the resources of the national government should be the responsibility of national leaders.

▸ Maintain a diversity of democratic institutions: The diversity of democratic institutions is a strength during a crisis, but there is a tendency to centralize power during a crisis (NDI 2022). Public leaders should follow the predetermined roles established to maintain the diversity of leaders involved.

Box 15:   Bringing in external experts to enhance trust

One important way for public leaders to involve external stakeholders during the crisis response is to use experts to relay information to citizens. This can reassure the public and build trust by letting them know that someone with very high levels of knowledge regarding the specific crisis is working with public leaders on the response.

These experts could include an epidemiologist specializing in modeling disease spread during a health crisis, a logistics specialist if the crisis involves importing food or materials, or an economist in the case of an inflation crisis.

While information-sharing processes will likely be outlined in the crisis communication plan developed before the crisis, it is important to monitor and review these processes as the crisis evolves to ensure that relevant stakeholders are receiving the required information.

4.3 Develop and test messaging

Once the available information is assessed and stakeholders are engaged, public leaders can work with their teams to develop the messaging to be communicated and, if possible, test the messages before disseminating them to the public. External stakeholders can be engaged to test the messages during a crisis, especially those with connections to the community.

By incorporating democratic principles when designing messages during a crisis, public leaders should ensure that messages focus on **transparency, inclusion, information integrity, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability**:

▸ **Transparency:** Incorporating transparency in crisis communication messaging is key to improving trust in the government during times of crisis (Zheng 2023). This means that public leaders must remain accountable for their actions and admit when a mistake has been made. Public leaders should consider two key aspects when developing a transparent communication strategy: (1) sharing information early and often and (2) clarifying what they do not know.

▸ **Inclusion:** When developing messaging, and especially when advising the public on how to respond to crises, public leaders have an opportunity to enhance inclusion. This means understanding how the public will access messaging and how to make the messaging more appropriate and usable for the entire population. Different cultural, economic and gender considerations should be employed to determine how messaging will be received and acted upon.

▸ **Information Integrity:** When designing messaging, it is important to consider the language and information disseminated to the public to ensure that it is accurate and understandable. If common practice, public leaders can provide authentication on the messages that are disseminated.

▸ **Accessibility:** When developing and disseminating messages, public leaders must ensure the messages are as accessible as possible and that they reach everyone equitably so that the entire population is reached. This means considering languages spoken, disabilities (having sign language interpreters or audio options available), and education level (using pictographs in areas with low literacy rates). Another key consideration when designing messaging is that crises typically disproportionately impact the most vulnerable citizens and marginalized communities. Crisis communication needs to be accessible and tailored to these groups so that they do not become forgotten in a crisis.

▸ **Responsiveness:** Messaging during a crisis should highlight that public leaders are still gathering insights from the public and are listening to and understanding their needs. Public leaders should ensure that the advice given is relevant and acceptable to citizens.

▸ **Accountability:** When developing messaging, public leaders should consider their accountability to the public. They should use the opportunity of designing these messages to explain and justify their actions during a crisis.

4.3.1. Other principles to consider enhancing message efficacy and improve democratic responses

In addition to transparency, information integrity, inclusion, accessibility, responsiveness and accountability, the principles highlighted in Figure 11 below should be addressed in the development of crisis communication messages:

Crafting crisis communication messaging

When communicating to the public, the following tips can be used as a guide on how to craft messages to ensure accessibility.

Simple language	Simple language should be used so that the messages are easy to understand and remember.
	Simple messages such as the "Stay home, protect the NHS, save lives" message developed in the UK in response to COVID-19 will stick with people easily.
Maintain calm and reassuring presence	Citizens want their leaders to maintain calm during a crisis and that should come across in communication.
	Messaging should reassure the public that leaders have the response under control.
Be empathetic	People want to feel a response as much as they want to see one (Dolamore et al. 2020) therefore public leaders need to do their best to communicate that they care about what the public is facing and develop relationships.
Reinforce the actions taken to move forward	The public wants to hear that public leaders are thinking about the future and how to change things for the better.
	Communicating the actions that leaders will take to move forward will reassure citizens.
Consistency	Citizens should be able to steadily access information, therefore the government should release information often and maintain the infrastructure used to spread information.
	Messages from different stakeholders should be consistent.
Reliability	Public leaders should maintain quality sources of information and enable a media environment that is sustainable, independent, and transparent. This ensures citizens can trust the information presented to them.
Accuracy	Information provided by public leaders should be correct and precise. Crisis communicators should be sure of the facts before communicating information to the public.

Figure 11: Additional tips for crisis communication messaging

4.4 Develop timelines for communication

> "The timing of crisis communication messaging by public leaders is crucial for maintaining trust and ensuring transparency and information integrity during a crisis. As soon as information on the crisis is available, public leaders should alert the public, and updates should occur frequently. This helps to develop awareness of the crisis and establish facts, which can decrease the likelihood of information manipulation spreading in an information void."

Figure 12 below highlights recommendations for the timing of crisis communication for public leaders and different considerations for communicating in these different phases (CDC 2014; WHO 2017).

Communication During a Crisis

When a crisis occurs, public leaders should start communicating early and keep communicating throughout the crisis.

Communicate Early
- The first 24 hours of a crisis are crucial.
- As soon as a leader becomes aware of a crisis development, there should be initial communication with the public.
- Additional communication should occur once the initial facts are verified.

Communicate Often
- After initial communication, regular updates will provide transparency and avoid an information void.
- Details of the communication can include any changes to the crisis situation, ongoing government activities, reiterating the facts to maintain information integrity and detailing any actions citizens should be taking.

Continued Communication
- As the crisis evolves, communication can shift from initial response to more long-term communication.
- This communication should reflect any updates on risks, the recovery plans, recommendations for recovery/rebuilding and correcting misinformation.

Figure 12: Crisis communication timing

Initial messaging should inform the public of the situation, with what is currently known about the who, what, when, where and why of the crisis (CDC 2014). In disseminating that information, public leaders should consider the following:

- ▸ Be honest.

- ▸ Avoid being overly optimistic.

- ▸ Ensure the accuracy of the information.

Continued communication after the acute phase of the crisis provides an opportunity for public leaders to maintain credibility and transparency with citizens regarding how the crisis occurred and what is being done to respond. Public leaders should use this phase of communication to answer questions such as:

- ▸ "How did this happen?"

- ▸ "What are we doing to avoid this happening again?"

- ▸ "What do I need to do to recover?"

- ▸ "What support is available?"

Below is an example of the timing of communication activities that public leaders can undertake in a crisis to ensure transparent, inclusive, accessible, and accurate communication (Figure 13). Timings may vary based on different types of crises, but the important aspect to remember is for public leaders to communicate as soon as facts are known and to communicate frequently during the acute phase of the crisis.

Communication Timeline

When communicating during the initial phases of a crisis, a balance should be found between **sharing information quickly** with the media to disseminate to the public and **providing accurate information that can be verified.**

15 MINUTES

30 MINUTES

1 HOUR

ONGOING

In the **first 15 minutes,** a public leader's priorities include:
- Gathering the crisis communication team.
- Establishing the known facts and **communicating them,** including what you don't know.
- **Being ready to respond** to media.

In the **first 30 minutes,** public leaders should further assess the situation, which includes the following:
- **Engage** the necessary stakeholders.
- Determine what **additional information** should be gathered.
- Assess initial response and **provide updates**.

Once the initial communication is done, public leaders should use the **first hour** to:
- **Review** the initial communication.
- Determine how ongoing messaging should be **targeted to marginalized groups.**
- **Assess the media response** and engage media partners.

Public leaders can conduct the following **ongoing** activities to ensure democratic crisis communication:
- **Provide regular updates,** even if information doesn't change.
- **Monitor social media** for disinformation and sentiment
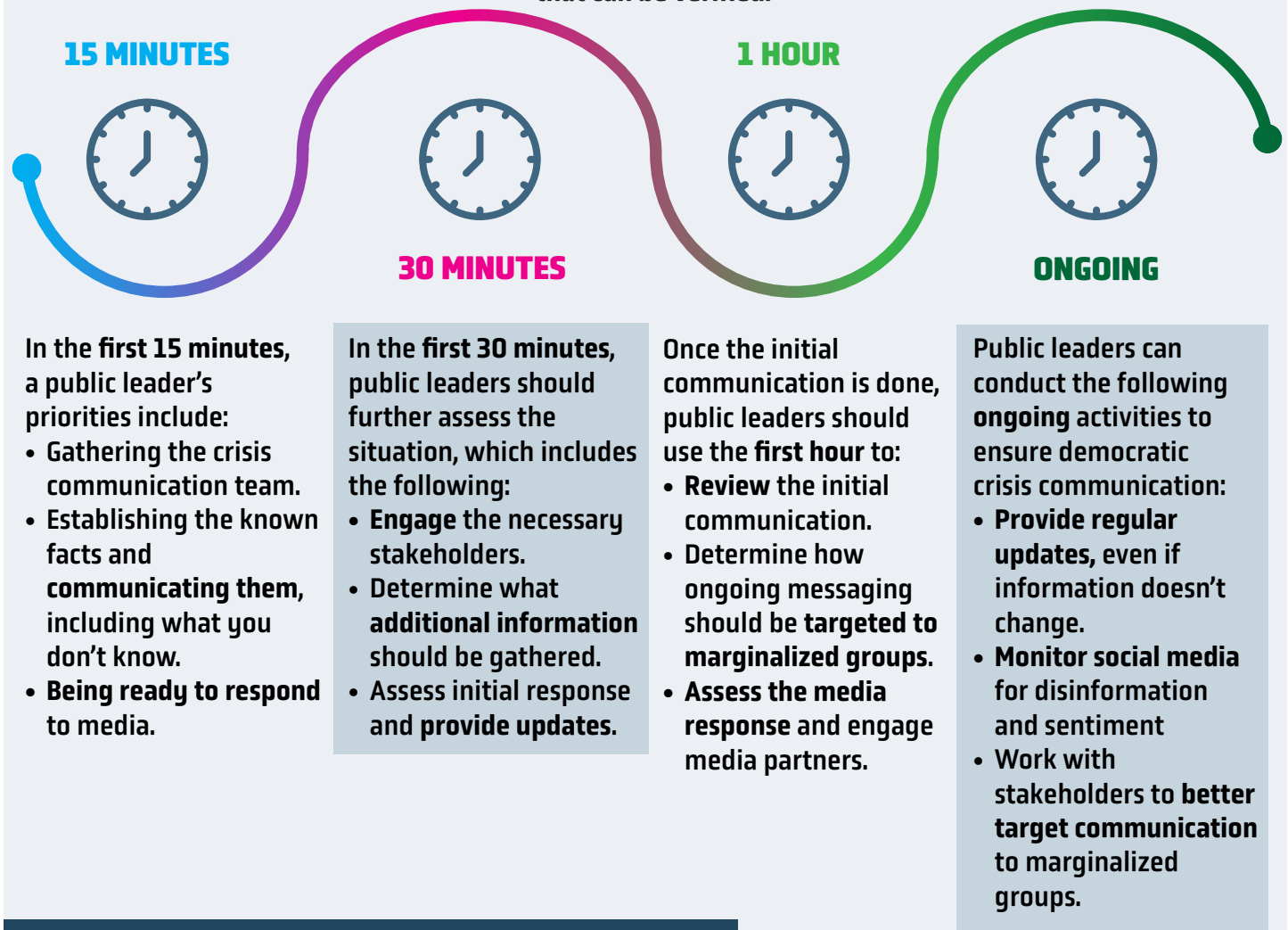- Work with stakeholders to **better target communication** to marginalized groups.

Figure 13:   *Timing of communication (Adapted from: United Nations Office of Counter–Terrorism, n.d.)*

4.5 Disseminate messaging through communication channels

Upon development of the messaging, public leaders should determine which communication channels are most appropriate to disseminate the messaging. The choice of communication channel for the dissemination of messaging should be inclusive and accessible while being targeted to the needs of the audience. Disseminating messaging should also consider information integrity, ensuring that information is clear and accurate. See Box 16 for an example of monitoring for information integrity.

Box 16:   Monitoring information integrity in Kosovo

Monitoring in Kosovo found a proliferation of false information and a media environment that lacks transparency. One reason for this is the manipulation of the media by those who fund major media channels. The media has no legal obligations to publish detailed funding reports, and regulatory agencies are chronically underfunded. These factors create an information environment particularly vulnerable to information manipulation. NDI in Kosovo has worked to manually monitor information manipulation surrounding COVID-19 and found that manipulative and false content was rampant on news portals and social media posts. One example included a fake official government document explaining that vaccines contained microchips, a claim that has circulated globally.

Bolstering information integrity and minimizing impacts on democracy must involve all actors related to the information environment, including the media, tech platforms, political parties, civil society organizations, and the wider electorate (Cushman et al. 2021).

The crisis communication plan developed before the crisis can be consulted to determine the appropriate channels, as it will have identified different channels that are most suitable for different target groups. For example, in Liberia, most citizens do not have access to television; instead, they use the radio to receive most of their information on a crisis. These channels will change based on the region but should focus on those that citizens use to receive information, including marginalized groups. This will ensure messages are disseminated in ways that are inclusive and accessible. Public leaders should also determine the crisis context when choosing communication channels. Natural hazards may result in power outages or infrastructure damage, which could knock out certain channels.

Messaging must be disseminated through multiple channels, which will typically include: (1) working with the media, from the local to the international level, and (2) using social media.

4.5.1 Working with the media

During a crisis, public leaders can leverage their relationships with the media to:

▸ Provide the initial warnings and notices.

▸ Disseminate updates on changing situations.

▸ Spread evacuation notices.

▸ Provide updates on the government's response.

Importantly, engaging with the media can help to counter rumors and information manipulation and provide accurate and reliable facts on what is happening during a longer-term response. Enough information should be provided at the beginning of the crisis to ensure there is no information vacuum in which information manipulation can spread.

When working with the media, public leaders should consider that different categories of media will serve different functions in a crisis and have different interests. These categories are (1) local media, (2) impacted media and (3) interested media and are described below. These designations are mainly related to proximity to a crisis. During a crisis, all media is a priority for public leaders, but each should be handled differently to ensure the messaging is being delivered appropriately.

▸ Local media – Media based in the area where a crisis is occurring. This media will be the most responsive and will provide up-to-date, accurate information that is actionable by citizens. Strong connections with local media will allow public leaders to spread information on a crisis more easily through trusted local sources.

▸ Impacted media – Media outside the direct area of impact but adjacent and therefore still impacted. In addition, the trade press of impacted industries is considered impacted media. While not directly impacted, this group will require up-to-date information so that they can note what the impacts will be on the community.

▸ Interested media – Media in different countries, states or provinces not facing the direct impacts of the crisis but may be facing indirect impacts, such as an influx of displaced persons. While it is less important to provide regular updates and actionable advice, this group should still be kept informed so that they have information on the response.

During a crisis situation, the media will contact the government for information. Below are examples of some of the questions the media may ask. Public leaders should have answers prepared to these questions quickly in a crisis (City of Sequim 2018):

▸ What happened? Why did it happen?

▸ What are you doing for the people who are hurt?

▸ Is the situation under control?

▸ Why wasn't this prevented?

Box 17 highlights the importance of answering these questions to improve transparency.

Box 17: Transparency: The importance of explaining the "why"

During a crisis, public leaders must explain the "why" of the crisis and the government communication so that citizens can be empowered with accurate and comprehensive information. This serves to increase transparency in government communications. It may not be possible to expand on why a crisis happened immediately, as there will be ongoing investigations and not all of the facts might be understood at the beginning of a crisis. If this is the case, public leaders should commit to providing this information as soon as possible to maintain transparency. Below are two examples from The Gambia and Liberia on explaining the "why" of crisis communication from public leaders:

Gambia – During the recent 2024 Gambia Ferry Services Crisis, the Gambia Ports Authority issued press releases that, while understood to be accurate, did not contain comprehensive information concerning why there were no available ferries to transport passengers from the Banjul Port. This led citizens and civil society to express doubt and mistrust over the actions of the Ports Authority.

Liberia – During the West African 2013–2016 Ebola pandemic, it was crucial that family members and carers did not touch persons with Ebola, even after death, due to the virus's long lifespan. Because touching a loved one who is sick or deceased is an instinctive part of human nature, citizens needed to understand the rationale for the communication.

A balance must be found between sharing information quickly with the media to disseminate to the public and providing accurate information that can be verified. It is important to present the media with the facts of the situation without exaggeration or sugarcoating the crisis. When sharing information about a crisis, public leaders should not shy away from sharing the facts, even if they are not positive. Presenting the facts in this manner will increase transparency. Box 18 demonstrates the framing of these more negative facts.

Box 18: "No such thing as bad news"

Initial crisis communication messaging should be framed so that public leaders are not giving bad news about a crisis but are instead providing the facts that will empower citizens to make the appropriate decisions in the face of a crisis. The more information communicated, the better, as the more informed citizens are, the easier it will be for them to make decisions.

Because of the media's role as a watchdog, the media plays a very important part in spreading information. Public leaders need to work with the media during all phases of the process to maintain transparency, accountability and information integrity. The veracity of information given to the media matters, as well as the timing, for retaining transparency balanced with information integrity.

4.5.2 Using social media

Social media use has greatly expanded globally in the last 15 years, and it is now an important vehicle for delivering crisis communication messages. Public leaders can use social media in a crisis situation to (City of Sequim 2018):

▸ Provide information to a wide audience.

▸ Help dispel rumors by immediately providing information.

▸ Create connections and build relationships with citizens.

▸ Help understand public emotions and concerns.

While social media can be an effective tool, local leaders must be cautious about how it is used in their specific contexts (Wendling et al. 2013). Each country has a different social media landscape, so public leaders should consider the following in determining how much to rely on social media to spread crisis communication:

▸ **Access to internet** – Internet access may vary depending on the infrastructure of a country and may even vary by region, so in areas with low internet access, public leaders will need to rely on other methods.

▸ **Preference** – Some countries will have one social media platform that is used more than others, which can also change depending on age group. Public leaders should understand these preferences.

▸ **Trust** – Different target groups may have a social media platform that they trust more than others, which could change in different countries/regions. Public leaders should research to understand the landscape of trust.

When using social media for communication, public leaders should consider these activities to maintain transparency and information integrity while using social media during a crisis (CDC 2014; City of Sequim 2018):

▸ **Disseminate verified government messaging** – Social media can be used to provide updates on the crisis, how citizens can respond, and what the government is doing to help citizens. The information disseminated by public officials on these platforms should be verified and come from official government sources.

▸ **Ensure accuracy** – Everything sent via social media should be fact-checked and as accurate as possible. Information can spread quickly on social media, so anything released by the government must be clear and accurate.

▸ **All platforms should communicate the same information** – Different platforms (Facebook, X, etc.) and different government departments or ministries should release similar information. There should be coordination between different public leaders before releasing anything. The information on social media should also be consistent with what is being communicated with other media.

Figure 14 below highlights some summary do's and don'ts for public leaders to consider when using social media for crisis communication:

Considerations when preparing for a crisis

Social media has become a tool that can help communication with a wide audience. Below are a few examples of how social media should be used during a crisis.

Do...

☑ Be empathetic to citizens views.

☑ Provide consistent information from all government departments.

☑ Only share verified information.

Don't...

☒ Provide conflicting information.

☒ Use it as the only form of communication.

☒ Contribute to misinformation.

Figure 14: Do's and don'ts of using social media for crisis communication

Social media is also an effective means of two-way communication between the public and public leaders during crises, as it provides quick and direct access to their concerns. Engaging in constructive dialogue with members of the public through social media can help to identify if the crisis communication strategy needs to be changed to better meet their informational needs. Monitoring social media can also help public leaders determine whether accurate information is being disseminated during the crisis.

4.5.3 Other channels and considerations

While social media and traditional media are commonly used for crisis communication, public leaders should consider other forms of communication to ensure inclusion and accessibility. Below are several considerations that public leaders should make when choosing which communication channels to use:

▸ Literacy rates: Literacy rates in a country or region should play a large role in how a public leader communicates about a crisis. In areas with low literacy rates, communication may need to be focused on word of mouth or pictures instead of text-heavy communication. Advice spread on social media should also include pictures in areas with low literacy rates.

▸ Cell phone access: Some areas that public leaders are communicating with may have high levels of cell phone use, and therefore, warning messages can be sent via cell phone or on social media. Other areas may not have the same access to cell phones or quality service available, and therefore, other channels need to be used. Public leaders can consider handing out flyers or using word of mouth to disseminate information.

▸ Power outage rates: Public leaders should consider how often there are power blackouts or telecommunication outages in different areas when communicating about crises. If access to cell phones or internet is unreliable, other forms of communication should be considered.

▸ Influence of community leaders: In some places, especially smaller villages and towns or among different marginalized groups, word of mouth is still a very effective form of crisis communication (Badri 2021; Bradford et al. 2017). Public leaders should use developed partnerships with local community leaders or external stakeholders to spread communication messaging and crisis information via word of mouth.

▸ Government control: It is vital to democratic communication that information remains fully accessible, even where information manipulation spreads. Shutting down the internet is not a legitimate option. Counternarratives and evidence-based information should be disseminated through authoritative sources and channels.

4.6   Updating crisis communication plans

During a crisis, the situation will be fast-paced and constantly evolving. These changes in a crisis may require public leaders to adjust their crisis communication plans. Throughout the crisis, leaders should monitor how effective their crisis communication has been and update plans accordingly. Any changes during an acute crisis should be noted in the crisis communication plan so that a record of changes can be analyzed afterward.

5.   After crisis: Recovery and rebuilding

Once the initial crisis has passed, the work done to communicate in a way that enhances democratic principles should be built upon to recover and rebuild that demonstrates the commitment to these principles. Box 19 highlights how different principles can be considered after a crisis.

Box 19:   Democratic principles and communicating after a crisis:

Transparency: After the initial phase of a crisis, public leaders must continue to communicate openly about the recovery phase. This includes informing the public on any residual risks and how governments are spending public money on the rebuilding process as well as detailing what is or is not working. This will allow citizens to understand how public leaders are continuing to handle long-term crisis response.

Information Integrity: Information manipulation can flourish after a crisis, especially if the response was perceived poorly or the communication during the crisis was lacking. Maintaining information integrity after a crisis entails monitoring social media and debunking rumors that are spreading as well as continuing to disseminate trustworthy, truthful and verifiable information to all citizens.

Inclusion: During the recovery stage, inclusion should be considered in the rebuilding process. Communication from public leaders should ensure that no one is being left behind during this phase. Decisions on recovery have the potential to leave behind different marginalized groups further exacerbating the harms of the crisis. Communicating inclusively can help to reduce these disparities.

Accessibility: Public leaders must maintain accessible communication following a crisis. This will provide the important recovery information to all who need it. For example, if a hurricane hits and people lose access to their homes and power, information needs to be spread in person for those who cannot access the internet or do not have access to a computer. For in-person communications, translation services and sign language interpretation may be required and should be considered.

Responsiveness: After a crisis, citizens will have feedback on how they believe public leaders handled the crisis. Listening to that feedback and changing approaches based on this feedback will allow public leaders to build trust and enhance democratic principles. Public leaders should use the established connections with stakeholders and established mechanisms to ensure they receive this feedback.

Accountability: This phase of crisis communication most highlights the importance of accountability in democratic processes. During recovery, public leaders should provide platforms to explain their actions and provide space for citizens to hold them accountable for how they communicated and acted during the crisis.

While the crisis may be winding down, the public will still try to understand what happened. There is the potential for blame and anger to grow within information voids, and marginalized groups can often become the targets of these sentiments (Vos et al. 2011). Following the initial crisis phase, public leaders can transition their focus from response to recovery and rebuilding. This is a time for leaders to continue communicating with citizens on how resources are being allocated, what is working and not working in the response, and what activities are ongoing. This will maintain transparency and trust in the government's response. This phase of the crisis also calls for reflection on the crisis communication practices that leaders used during the crisis to evaluate the overall performance, develop lessons learned, and determine aspects of the communication plan that need to change. This will demonstrate responsiveness and accountability. This stage should include fostering citizen engagement to understand how messages were received and create a sense of citizen ownership over continued response (GFDRR 2019). The activities for this crisis phase are outlined in the checklist below:

After Crisis Checklist

☑ **Continue crisis communication activities.**
  - Set clear expectations.

☑ **Analyze lessons learned.**
  - Consult with citizens.
  - Use feedback loops.

☑ **Engage stakeholders.**

5.1 Continue crisis communication activities

While the active crisis may be drawing to a close, public leaders will still need to communicate information regarding recovery and rebuilding. This may include providing information on how to apply for government assistance, how the government is helping in the rebuilding process, details on different organizations that are assisting government activities, and other details regarding the ongoing aspects of the crisis (GFDRR 2019; WHO 2022). This communication will serve to enhance transparency in the response phase. For example:

- Communication between different branches of the government and service providers (e.g., electricity, water, health care) will need to look at longer-term planning, as weakened infrastructures and overburdened systems are vulnerable to further crises. The outcomes of these conversations will need to be communicated to the public, and response plans will need to consider the long-term impacts of crises.

- Various government recovery schemes, such as funding for rebuilding houses following disasters such as hurricanes, need to be communicated in a way that is accessible to all who need them.

- Communication surrounding recovery should include information on which organizations outside of the government can be contacted for assistance in local areas. Organizations such as local food banks and the Red Cross/Red Crescent may have assistance programs that can supplement government assistance.

The public will expect to continue to be updated on these issues, and public leaders will need to consider long-term post-crisis communication strategies. Communication by public leaders should continue to follow the principles laid out in the before crisis and during crisis phase, focusing on providing frequent, transparent, inclusive and accessible communication. Communication should flow through the channels established during the crisis so that citizens still know where to find accurate information. This is also a time of opportunity to highlight the good work done by the authorities and the positive response actions taken by the public.

> "Communication by public leaders should continue to follow the principles laid out in the before crisis and during crisis phase, focusing on providing frequent, transparent, inclusive and accessible communication. Communication should flow through the channels established during the crisis so that citizens still know where to find accurate information."

As the immediate focus on responding to the crisis winds down, public leaders will face difficult questions about the recovery phase. These questions will be about how the community will be rebuilt or how the economy will recover after the crisis. These tough questions will be difficult to answer, as public leaders will take longer to make the more complex decisions required during recovery. To adequately respond to these questions and provide transparency and accountability in communication, public leaders should invest further time in two-way dialogue with the public to learn about their experiences of the crisis and what can be done differently in the future. This can be done through listening sessions or other mechanisms to collect stories on citizens' experiences in the crisis and preferences on rebuilding processes. This dialogue with citizens will improve responsiveness.

Box 20: Acknowledging anniversaries

While continuing to communicate after a crisis, public leaders should understand the importance of anniversaries and significant events relating to the crisis. This could be the one- or five-year anniversaries of the crisis or the first day back to school after a school shooting. In communicating after a crisis, plans should be made to acknowledge these events, and public leaders should develop messaging surrounding these anniversaries to convey experiences, important narratives and learnings they are trying to highlight.

5.1.1 Set clear expectations

A part of public leaders' continued communication with the public during the recovery phase is to set expectations on the speed of recovery and government priorities during the rebuilding. This will increase transparency and set benchmarks for the government's accountability. Expectations set with communities will depend on the crisis type and extent of damage but can include benchmarks, such as:

▸ The first priority is to have utilities fully functional again.

▸ Transport infrastructure is running normally again within xx days.

▸ Local businesses are back to trading normally within a month.

▸ Revitalize the downtown area by restoring property and building new infrastructure within xx months.

In developing these benchmarks for recovery, public leaders should consult with the community to determine their priorities and the changes they would like to see, and consider these priorities when setting these expectations. This will allow public buy-in to the rebuilding process as well as a better understanding of the government's priorities and capabilities. This public consultation, as well as the final benchmarks and expectations set, should be thoroughly communicated to the public. This will allow public leaders to be accountable to the benchmarks set, helping citizens to better understand the rebuilding process and manage their expectations.

5.2   Analyze lessons learned

> One of the most important activities for the after crisis phase is for leaders to understand what worked and what did not work. This is an opportunity to examine the communication infrastructures and plans that were established before a crisis to analyze how they were implemented during the crisis. Conducting these reviews can increase transparency in government functioning and demonstrate to the public that leaders believe in improving their practices, therefore increasing trust in elected leaders. It also serves to increase accountability, as public leaders can explain their actions and hear from citizens about what went well and what should be changed.

There are several activities that leaders can conduct during this process (CDC 2014), including:

- ‣ Evaluate communication effectiveness.

- ‣ Document the lessons learned and communicate the findings.

- ‣ Determine specific changes that should be made to communication practices.

- ‣ Determine the effectiveness of citizen engagement activities.

Writing these lessons learned in a report that will be shared with all involved, including the public, will increase accountability and assure the public that any issues are being considered and addressed. Box 21 provides an example of a report regarding transparency in public spending.

Box 21: Transparency in post–crisis reporting

Following a crisis, public leaders should review their practices and communicate to the public the activities that took place. This should include a transparent report of how public leaders spent public funding during a crisis. For example, a report by the U.K. government details how much the government spent on the COVID–19 response (**House of Commons 2022**). This transparency allows citizens to understand where their tax money was spent in crisis response, and communicating this information fosters stronger trust in public leaders.

5.2.1 Consult with citizens on effectiveness of response to enhance lessons learned

Developing lessons learned allows leaders to reach out to citizens to understand how they experienced the crisis communication messaging. Understanding the citizens' perspectives can ensure that the public has a role in shaping practices going forward, increasing two-way communication and citizen participation in democratic processes. These activities can help garner support for public leaders (CDAC Network 2022; GFDRR 2019). This consultation can take place in multiple forms, including:

- Town hall meetings
- CSO feedback sessions
- Focus group discussions
- Online information-gathering campaigns

The goal of crisis communication is to return to normal operations, so citizen feedback is essential in determining where a community is in that process. The stakeholders from civil society who were involved in the pre-crisis planning can be used to understand the perspectives of the citizens that they represent. Additionally, local leaders can help the national leaders understand how their citizens felt about the communication from the government and where improvements are needed. For example, work has been done in Fiji to detail how their public leaders have engaged in participatory feedback gathering from citizens (**CDAC Network 2020**).

5.2.2 Use feedback loops

One way for local leaders to better understand how citizens received crisis communication messages and understand how to improve the communication process for future crises is to use the feedback loop method described above (Figure 8). Using these feedback loops will improve public leaders' responsiveness. There are two ways to use this method to understand citizens' views following a crisis, either as additional questions to the routine feedback loops that are ongoing in a local area or as an extra round of the feedback loops to specifically evaluate the crisis communication messaging:

- Additional questions to routine feedback loops – If feedback loops are already in place, adding additional questions to the next scheduled iteration will allow for a simple collection of basic information about how communication was perceived following a crisis. While it may not gather large amounts of data, it will produce the information needed to understand what worked and what did not in terms of communicating with citizens during a recent crisis.

- Extra round of feedback loops – While more logistically challenging, more information can be gathered from a whole round of feedback loops dedicated to the perceptions of crisis communication. Questions should be asked about whether citizens received messaging that was helpful, how they received the messages, if they followed the advice given, if they trusted the messaging, what they would have liked to have done differently and how they felt about the recovery process. By dedicating a whole session to these questions, government officials conducting the survey also allow citizens to talk about their experiences. Intensive feedback loops will gather large amounts of data on how the communication was conducted, greatly enhancing the lessons learned.

> "Collecting and actioning feedback from citizens can help public leaders understand citizen priorities and where leaders can improve the crisis response, but it can also serve to foster a sense of ownership and empowerment among citizens in the crisis review process."

5.3 Address necessary changes

After reviewing lessons learned and gathering citizens' views of the crisis communication, public leaders and their staff will have access to vast amounts of data. The crisis communication plan should include measures to analyze this data. The gathering of this data presents an opportunity for public leaders to advocate for changes in the system where required, especially where they can further integrate democratic principles into crisis communication. The processes that were developed in the pre-crisis phase should be examined for issues and weaknesses (CDC 2014). Pay specific attention to:

- Interdepartmental communication flows

- Synchronized messaging from different departments

- Inputs from external stakeholders and advisers received and integrated into communication to citizens

- Leadership (president, ministers, etc.) being onboard with transparent, inclusive communication efforts

- Whether the crisis communication team was able to access the pertinent information

- The information verification process

- The timing and frequency of messages being released to the public

- Enhanced citizen participation

Along with these areas, all aspects of the communication plan should be examined following a crisis, as there is always room for improvement for the next crisis, and every crisis will provide new examples to draw from. See Figure 15 below for an infographic of the necessary reflections that public leaders should take after a crisis to improve communication in coming crises.

Improving crisis communication practices

Following a crisis, reflecting on the process of crisis communication and how effective it was will improve communication practices going forward.

Analyze how different departments shared data on different aspects of the crisis and how different public leaders and spokespeople cooperated

Interdepartmental communication flow

During a crisis, different public leaders and ministries should have consistent messaging. This should be analyzed post crisis for any breakdowns

Synchronized messaging

It should be examined whether input from external advisors or shareholders was integrated into communication

Input from external stakeholders

It is important for public leaders at the very top to be onboard with transparent, inclusive communication efforts

Leadership buy-in

Effective crisis communication

Public leaders effectively communicating with citizens using democratic principles to ensure that communication protects and enhances democracy

Access to information

The access to and availability of all necessary information should be analyzed, including how access to information can be improved

Information verification process

The way that information was verified, including partnerships with the media should be examined for any issues

Timing and frequency of messages

Information should be shared early and often. This timing and frequency should be examined post crises for any necessary changes

Citizen participation

Wherever possible, citizen participation and feedback should be gathered. After crisis the amount of citizen participation should be analyzed for improvements

Figure 15: Crisis communication reflections

6. Conclusion

This guide provides lessons and insights for elected leaders and civil servants to develop a crisis communication response that reinforces the democratic system in which they operate, whether at the local or national level, and better serves the needs of citizens. By addressing the three critical stages of a crisis—before, during, and after—this guidance emphasizes the importance of preparation, effective real-time communication, and post-crisis evaluation to build resilience and foster citizen trust. Drawing on a diverse range of country experiences, the recommendations outlined here offer valuable strategies but should be tailored to the unique circumstances of each context and crisis type to ensure maximum effectiveness. Improving crisis communication procedures will ensure that the initial response communication is effective, thereby improving trust in the government.

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8. Appendix

Appendix A: Questions to guide crisis communication activities

Crisis Communication Guide – Checklist Questions

Depending on the government structure, these questions are suitable for senior communication professionals or decision-makers in the emergency response agency.

Before crisis:
Develop your crisis communication plan.

1. Understand your legal frameworks.
    ‣ Are there legal frameworks that exist governing crisis management in your country? If so, do they specify specific roles and responsibilities for crisis communication?
    ‣ What other regulations or frameworks exist that can protect citizens during crises? Are there plans for how to communicate these regulations to the public?

2. Set your communication goals.
    ‣ What goals will guide the crisis communication team before, during and after a crisis? Does the communication plan reflect these goals?

3. Identify your key stakeholders.
    ‣ Who are the key government stakeholders for crisis communication? Will there be any changes to these stakeholders based on different types of disasters (natural hazards, financial crises, social crises)?
    ‣ What role does your team/department/agency play within the key crisis communication stakeholders?
    ‣ What additional roles are needed for crisis communication not covered by current government employees (i.e., crisis call centers)? Are plans in place to fill those roles during a crisis?
    ‣ Are the different roles and responsibilities of local and national public leaders in crisis communication well defined?
    ‣ Does your team/department/agency have an updated contact list of external stakeholders to engage with for different crises? Do external stakeholders have a defined role in supporting the team/department/agency in the event of a crisis?

4. Identify your target audiences.
    ‣ Has your team/department/agency identified the target groups that will be highly impacted by different crises (natural hazards, social crises, conflict, etc.)?
    ‣ Has research been done to understand the communication needs of these target groups?
    ‣ Has anyone in the team/department/agency developed relationships with stakeholders that have a deeper understanding of the needs of the target groups?

5. Identify your communication channels.
    ‣ Does the team/department/agency have an updated contact list of intergovernmental personnel to contact in the event of a crisis?
    ‣ Are there established channels/tools/applications that are used for intergovernmental communication?
    ‣ Have the communication channels used by citizens been mapped? What are the most common channels?

- Have partnerships been developed with both local and national media outlets? Is it clear who within those media organizations will be the contact points during crises?
- Have social media accounts been created for your team/department/agency? Is it clear who will be responsible for posting on social media during a crisis?
- Is there a list of smaller, community-based, communication channels that will be used during a crisis? If so, have partnerships been established with these community organizations?

6. Engage your citizens and communities.
- What engagement processes are in place for proactively communicating with citizens about their needs and experiences?
- Has there been any attempt at two-way communication or gathering insights from citizens? If there has already been work done to gather insights from citizens, has there been any focus on understanding crisis communication needs?
- Has your team/department/agency established technical tools for citizen engagement?

7. Map your common challenges.
- Has your team/department/agency mapped the common challenges that exist in your country (e.g., areas with low literacy rates, areas with much lower socioeconomic status)? Have these challenges been considered in relation to crisis communication?
- What plans are in place to address these challenges when communicating during a crisis?

8. Prepare your messaging content.
- Have principles such as transparency and inclusion been considered in planning for crisis communication?
- Does your team/department/agency have a list of common messages prepared that will apply to most crises?

9. Create checklists.
- Have checklists been created for communication processes in a crisis?
- Have you considered Q.1–Q.8 above when developing these checklists?

Conduct trainings and exercises to build awareness of crisis preparedness and the communication plan.

- Do you have a list of different courses, trainings, and workshops on crisis communication that the team/department/agency can participate in?
- Has your team/department/agency received specific training on the crisis communication plan? Is there evidence of a good understanding of each member's role in crisis communication following these trainings?

During crisis:
Implement and refine your crisis communication plan.

1. Assess the available information and activate the plan.
- Has a crisis been identified?
- If so, have you engaged the crisis communication plan and assessed whether it is running effectively? Are all roles and responsibilities assigned?

2. Engage your stakeholders.
   ▸ Have relevant government stakeholders detailed in the plan been engaged with?
   ▸ Have the relevant external stakeholders been contacted? Have their specific roles been identified?
   ▸ Have you identified any stakeholder gaps in the plan? Have you addressed these gaps?

3. Develop and test messaging.
   ▸ Have the crisis communication messages been created?
   ▸ Is the messaging about government activities as transparent as possible?
   ▸ Has inclusion been considered in the messaging? Have different messages been developed for the appropriate target groups?
   ▸ Has accessibility of different messages been considered? Have messages been translated into different languages? Are there subtitles for videos, and is plain language used?

4. Develop your communication timelines.
   ▸ What is the timeframe for communicating with citizens about this crisis?
   ▸ Has the spokesperson been designated? Have they established the timing of news briefings?

5. Disseminate the messages through communication channels.
   ▸ What is the social media strategy at this time? Is someone responsible for updating social media accounts?
   ▸ Have the media contacts been engaged? Are they aware of the plans for centralized communication (who the spokesperson is, which website will be updated regularly, etc.)?

After crisis:

Continue to apply your crisis communication plan, reflect on it and revise it.

1. Continue your crisis communication.
   ▸ How does the crisis messaging need to be adapted to focus on recovery and rebuilding? Has the extent of the damage and the plans for recovery been described? Have government recovery schemes been communicated with the community?
   ▸ Have benchmarks been set for recovery? Have these benchmarks been communicated? Were citizens consulted to develop these benchmarks and expectations?
   ▸ Has a plan been developed to acknowledge any key crisis anniversaries?

2. Analyse the lessons learned.
   ▸ What are the lessons learned (positive and negative) about communicating with citizens in this type of crisis?
   ▸ How well was the crisis communication plan followed?
   ▸ How effective was the crisis communication in informing citizens of crisis details?
   ▸ How can these insights be integrated into this next phase? How do they impact preparing for another crisis?
   ▸ What feedback and engagement mechanisms have been adopted to solicit feedback from citizens on communication during the crisis? How effective have the mechanisms been?

3. Address the necessary changes.
   ▸ Have necessary changes in crisis communication been established?
   ▸ Have lessons learned been integrated into the crisis communication plan?

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