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Challenges and Recommendations for Government Communication in Times of Crisis: Lessons for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods in South Africa

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Executive Summary

During times of national emergency, effective government communication is crucial. It is essential for mobilising and motivating the populace to support government's responses, health risk reduction measures, and efforts to repair severe damage recovery. This becomes especially important during public health emergencies and other disasters when the government must circulate information to restore social stability and combat pandemics. The World Health Organisation commended the South African government for its efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus, which included initiatives such as lockdowns, mobile lab units, training for medical professionals, and improved monitoring. However, public opinion on the government's response varied with each pandemic wave. While the government's containment strategies and mortality rates were emphasised, but the communication placed less emphasis on sustaining livelihoods, which hurt public perception. The message also neglected to provide special attention to certain groups of people, especially rural populations, whose livelihoods were severely affected by the pandemic. To address such challenges during emergencies, a proactive, dynamic, and comprehensive strategy to successful government communication is advised.

What is the issue?

In the framework of public administration, government communication is viewed as a tool for implementing policy objectives. The government's communication system informs the public and makes them aware of its actions. As a result, communication is essential to a country's democracy. For the welfare of the people, government communication must be effective. Governing requires constant exchange of information and ideas on policies, concepts, and choices between the leaders and the governed.

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To deal with the COVID-19 epidemic and lessen its impact on lives and livelihoods, government must be able to communicate effectively in a digital world of dangerous information, pervasive speculative thinking, and growing disbelief in government. For the government to successfully respond to pandemics, communication must be effective. As the pandemic gets worse, effective government communication needs to get more attention.

Figure 1: Different means of communication during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: https://issuu.com/gcispsm/docs/fighting_COVID-19_through_communication

The government created an official website for all COVID-19 related information at the start of the pandemic in South Africa. To educate and provide the public with accurate and detailed information, the website is regularly updated with comprehensive

data. Additionally, it provides contact information for those who might have further inquiries or need access to healthcare support related to COVID-19, as well as health and safety regulations in a number of languages.



Figure 2: Loudhailers are a common medium of communication in rural areas.

Source: <https://www.msf.org.za/news-and-resources/latest-news/COVID-19-and-rural-south-africa-good-bad-and-ugly>

This policy brief is based on research that examined 483 press announcements and releases that were updated on the websites (<https://sacoronavirus.co.za>) between 05 March 2020 and 15 January 2021 to investigate the government's communication in response to the pandemic. The study concentrated on what the information concerning the government's priorities and attention during the outbreak revealed. The study also looked at associated shifts and patterns in those priorities as well as the root causes. Communication is a factor of a message's most significant elements, the Focus of the Message (FOM) and the Target of the Message (TOM). These two elements were employed in our study to describe the priorities and communication objectives of the government. The study's findings imply that South Africa's government gave containment measures and updates on the coronavirus and mortality rates top priority. Rural areas and vulnerable populations were, however, rarely the focus of official news statements.

What are the lessons learnt?

The Focus of the Message (FOM)

The South African government's communication strategy during the first three months of the COVID-19 pandemic was primarily geared toward reducing infection and mortality rates. During the initial phases of the outbreak, the administration worked to reassure and enlighten the population. They largely concentrated on disseminating crucial knowledge about the virus, such as its symptoms and how it spreads. In order to protect themselves and others from the virus, the public keep a distance from others and use masks, according to the message.

The government turned its emphasis in the following months to delivering updates on pandemic rates, virus management successes, attempts to save lives, support livelihoods, containment measures, macro and microeconomic plans and policies, and obstacles in managing the pandemic. Unfortunately, the attention paid to these subsequent communications was less than what was paid to the initial communication. Over time, some of the subjects, like the macro-

and microeconomic strategies and policies of the government, received minimal attention. Furthermore, over time, little attention was paid to the government's initiatives to lower uncertainty and ease tension. In some instances, the public was not effectively informed of the information and policies by the government. For instance, the government's information regarding containment tactics like lockdowns was occasionally unclear, which caused confusion and dissatisfaction among the general population. While the government was successful in recognising the COVID-19 threat and instituting lockdowns to contain the virus and save lives, these actions had a detrimental effect on livelihoods, especially in rural areas. The pandemic's devastating nature, the limited time for response, and the state's lack of preparedness may explain why issues such as workers' union concerns, food security, and economic policies were not prioritised during the early months of the pandemic.

The Target of the Message (TOM)

According to the data, the general public, health professionals and labour organisations, were the South African government's main target audience during the first several months of the pandemic. Rural communities and vulnerable groups were occasionally reached out, but this was not done consistently over the course of the study period. As a result, these groups were not the government's primary communication targets.

The international community, traditional leaders, and civic society were all modestly targeted by the government's communication efforts, as well as any local or foreign investors. However, the government's approach was generalised and inactive, focusing on the general public and ignoring the unique needs of various demographic groups.

This strategy ignored the special needs of vulnerable groups, especially in rural areas, whose livelihoods were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and resulting lockdowns. The communication showed that no considerable attempts had been made to target any particular group of the public. Instead, the government was forced to choose between protecting the economy and saving lives and livelihoods.

What are the Policy Options?

- **Need for proactive preparedness:** Being proactive and not reactive in response to a disaster in alignment with the requirements of the South African Disaster Management Act (DMA) amended Act 16, 2015, which underscores disaster risk management by placing a strong focus on anticipating disaster and preparing for it at every level.
- **Comprehensive communication strategy:** Incorporating a more inclusive communication approach into disaster planning. As supported by the Government Communication and Information System framework, communication should be strategic to deliver an optimal service while maintaining transparency, productivity and interaction at all levels. This would support addressing the needs of the various unique population groups rather than the generalisation of the citizens.
- **Sensitivity to citizens' livelihoods:** Creating a holistic system for communication is critical to managing health risks and disasters, particularly those that affect the general public at different government levels such as the municipalities and provinces. This will protect minority groups who experience prejudice and discrimination due to public health emergencies, particularly during pandemics such as COVID-19.
- **Cooperative relationship:** Instituting supportive connections with international organisations, health workers and civil society to actively handle the health emergency and communicate pertinent information to all sectors in the country. In particular, the role of community based civil society formations cannot be overemphasised. Such structures are trusted in the community and have grassroots foot print.

Conclusively, it is important to consider the fact that various population groups in vastly different geographical settings are impacted in various ways and make sure that, rather than just responding to a crisis. Government communication should be established on a distinct consideration of its citizens and their problems and with acute awareness of rural settings and livelihoods. This is especially significant, given the cultural and contextual factors that strongly influence how communities experience catastrophes and the efficacy of disaster management measures in rural areas.

Cite this policy brief

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