



# Communicating Together

Standard operating procedures  
for UNCT communications on the SDGs

January 2022





# Communicating Together

This guidance will help UN Country Teams (UNCTs) and UN Communications Groups (UNCGs) better leverage the power of joint communications to make people care and take action for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- The North star for the entire United Nations development system is the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. All of our work is geared towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Our task is made more urgent by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the need to recover better than the “old normal” for the SDGs and during the Decade of Action – with few years remaining to fulfil the promise of this bold agenda to protect the planet and nurture a peaceful and prosperous world for all.
- To achieve the SDGs, countries need UN Country Teams (UNCTs) that work together to tackle complex challenges, including COVID-19. The UN must communicate together, too, highlighting the shared work of UN teams and the individual mandates of each UN entity.
- The priorities of UNCTs and UNCGs are grounded in the needs of the countries where they work and should also be shaped by the annual Communications Priorities document produced by the Department of Global Communications (DGC). In each country, these needs are outlined in a living document called the Common Country Analysis, or CCA. The CCA, in turn, is the foundation for the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF or Cooperation Framework). The Cooperation Framework guides UN development activities to fulfil the 2030 Agenda at the country level.
- This guidance helps UNCTs align their communications with the larger goals of the countries where they work and those of the United Nations.
- All elements in this guidance are aligned to the Management Accountability Framework (MAF) to ensure that communications and advocacy contribute to accelerating the achievement of the SDGs, leaving no one behind and ensuring respect for, and protection of, human rights and gender equality.
- This guidance is a result of an inter-agency effort with the UN Sustainable Development Group communications focal points. The taskforce was co-convened by the Development Coordination Office (DCO) and DGC.

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# 01. Introduction

## Background

**The purpose of these standard operating procedures (SOPs) is to help ensure UN development system communications is more effective at the country level by aligning it with General Assembly resolution 72/279, on UN reform.**

In his report on “Repositioning the United Nations development system to deliver on the 2030 Agenda: our promise for dignity, prosperity and peace on a healthy planet” (A/72/684): The Secretary-General outlined his vision of a “new generation of UN Country Teams” with enhanced capacity and skill sets at the Resident Coordinator Office to support countries in achieving the SDGs.

In this report (paragraph 66), the Secretary-General proposed “that an integrated communications structure be formed in each country by co-locating and merging the country offices of the United Nations information centres (UNICs) with Resident Coordinator Offices. Merging these two capabilities will generate a robust standing communications capacity within United Nations country teams, working alongside communications specialists from all entities to boost impact [of UNCTs’ work for the SDGs], while producing significant cost savings.”

## A new generation of UN Country Teams requires a new generation of UN Communications Groups.

By consolidating the work of communications in this way, UN reform helps the UN communicate together in each country with one strong UN voice. In the post-reform setting and especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNCTs have come together in an unprecedented way, showing it is possible to communicate effectively and coherently what they are doing as a UN team, conveying key results, figures and impacts, while also highlighting the work of their individual UN entities. This is a crucial approach to address complex challenges where the added value of each UNCT member/UN entity is fundamental. It is essential for a non-siloed, UN-wide approach to tackle not only the pandemic, with its health, socioeconomic and humanitarian responses, but also the SDGs.



## Contents

This guidance note builds on four other sets of guidelines, including the Guidelines for Communications and advocacy strategy for the Cooperation Framework UNSDG, 2021), “Terms of Reference on UNCGs” (UN Department of Global Communications/Department of Public Information, 2006), “SOPs on How to Communicate in a Crisis” (UNCG 2017) and the “UN Communication Guidance in Response to Protests” (2020). (The last document gives guidance on making public statements in response to protests).

This guide focuses on external communications and addresses three priority areas:

- The UN Communications Group
- A coherent image and positioning of the UN Country Team
- UN joint communications strategies

These guidelines will be reviewed periodically and revised based on country experiences. While the focus is on the three priority areas mentioned above, further guidance may be developed for other aspects of joint communications.



## 02. Guiding Principles

Guiding principles for Communicating Together apply at the country level. They are:

- **Emphasize the shared values, norms and standards of the United Nations system.**<sup>1</sup>  
Joint UN communications strengthens development processes and results by promoting linkages with the realization of human rights, gender equality, and other principles and purposes of the UN Charter.
- **Adapt the guidance to the country context.**  
This guidance is to be interpreted according to the country context and applied flexibly to meet local needs and capacities. It is vital to tailor approaches to the development context (low-, middle-, upper-middle- and high-income countries) and special situations (conflict, post-conflict and transition) and consider regional contexts that might have an impact at the country level.
- **Consistent and coherent messaging is a shared responsibility of all UNCT members.**  
Communicating Together does not mean that only one person speaks or acts as the UNCT's sole spokesperson (such as the Resident Coordinator). UN entities speak on their core mandates and expertise areas. As the Secretary-General representative, the senior-most UN leader (SRSG or RC/HC) is the lead spokesperson for the UNCT when it needs to speak with one voice. The SRSG or RC/HC also guides the UN Team's response to crises. See SOP on Crisis Communications and Communications Guidance for Social Protest and Management Accountability Framework (MAF).



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- **Agency-specific messages must be consistent with agreed common positions.**  
Such messages should complement – never contradict – joint UNCT/UN political or peacekeeping mission efforts.
- **Coordination and sharing timely information among UNCT members are essential.**  
This is particularly true with regard to agency-specific communication activities covering critical or sensitive issues or issues that may have system-wide implications. Coordination on these issues with regional and headquarters levels is equally important.

1 UNDG Human Rights Mainstreaming Mechanism Operational Plan 2011-2013.

# 03. Coherent Image of the United Nations

## Objectives of Communicating Together

- Position UN team as the most trustworthy and effective sustainable development partner by communicating actions and results of UN entities and partners.
- Inspire trust and confidence in the development cooperation system and motivate people to believe in and support UN agencies' mandates.
- Promote the values, norms and standards of the UN.
- Improve the visibility of the UN and its entities in their contributions to impacting people's lives positively.
- Present a coherent image of the UN Country Team while also giving credit to the entities involved.

To achieve these objectives, UNCTs must improve their communications coordination within the country, establish a common branding, respond promptly to time-sensitive matters, integrate communications into programme planning and delivery, and support shared objectives as outlined in the Cooperation Framework.

## Balancing the needs of individual UN entities with the needs of UNCTs

The identity of the UN and the respective identities of individual UN agencies are globally recognized, highly valued assets, protected by law as intellectual property. All communications about UNCTs or individual entities should respect – and advance – the value of this intellectual property.

UN entities must continue to support both mandate-specific and joint UN strategies. UN entities continue to support their own policies, messages, products and brand identities. However, these mandate-specific messages must be consistent with agreed common positions and complement joint UNCT and UN mission efforts. Entities are key players, part of the UN team.

The country presence and comparative advantages of each UN entity are considered when deciding whether to join forces on a particular project or communications campaign. These decisions are further guided by the social, political, economic and cultural context of the country.

UN entities are encouraged to communicate together coherently. This includes presenting themselves jointly under the UNCT brand or identity – especially when more than two UN entities, including integrated missions, are involved in a joint activity. This approach is instrumental when communicating with government partners on critical policy issues and sensitive topics, so that the UNCT speaks with one voice. This is a way to convey a coherent image/brand of the UN team, while specifying what entities are doing.



UNCTs should take a collective approach, presenting UN agencies as a group of coordinated entities that contribute to the SDGs<sup>2</sup>. Such communications will succeed only if they follow a unified or non-siloed approach. It helps to convey shared accountability to critical partners and stakeholders.

UN agencies are strongly encouraged to join forces on CCA/Cooperation Framework priorities, coordinating their mandate-specific communications. This approach is broader in scope and requires devising a joint communication plans that outlines complementary roles that the agencies can play in reaching out to stakeholders.

This coherent approach guides the representation of the UN and UN entities, as well as the modes of presentation outlined below.

## Representation of the UN and UN entity identities

Decisions to represent the UN's identity or that of its individual agencies can be made only with the agreement of the UNCT or the UN agency's representative in the UNCT or its headquarters, as relevant.

The official UN emblem is the only emblem that can be used to represent the Organization. According to the official Guidelines on the Use of the United Nations emblem, the logo cannot be altered by changing colours or adding elements such as taglines or slogans. Agencies' logos and branding must follow the agency's regulations on use and clearance processes.

The UNSDG Chair and the UNSDG Principals have agreed on common branding for the UNSDG and all UNCTs, which depicts the official UN emblem combined with the SDGs' palette. This common UNCT branding should be adopted by all UNCTs, as per the UNSDG leadership directive.<sup>3</sup> These convey the image of a post-reform, new generation of UNCTs. Both UNSDG and UNCT branding are aligned with the latest UN branding. (UNCT branding guidelines and UNSDG style guide).

All logos are an endorsement of the contents on which they appear; the use of logos on published materials indicates that an item has been cleared by the agency country representative and/or designated official. Prominent placement of logos is given only to contributors accountable for the published material.

Logos are used when agencies are authors or contributors to the content or have been financial contributors to production. This decision conveys the accountability of the participating partners and reinforces transparency.

2 For Sustainable Development Goals branding and FAQ on its use please see <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/> To request permission, please submit a sample or mock-up illustrating how you intend to use the icons or logo, along with a brief description of the desired use to [sdgpermissions@un.org](mailto:sdgpermissions@un.org), indicating SDG LOGO/ICON REQUEST in the subject line IN ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

3 UNSDG Principals and the UNSDG chair approved the UNCT brand, which resulted from a UNSDG communications task team exercise. The UNCT brand was rolled out to countries by the Department of Global Communications and DCO (previously DPI and DOCO) in October 2018.



# Modes of presentation of logos and identities

There are four modes of presenting UN logos and identities



## Presenting the UNCT logo

UN entities are encouraged to communicate together coherently, jointly under the UNCT brand or identity – especially when more than two UN entities, including integrated missions, are involved in a joint activity. UNCTs have flexibility in deciding which approach responds most appropriately to a given communication initiative or product. For joint communication products, the UNCT should use its branding, which includes the name of the country served.

## Presenting the UN with supporting UN agencies or together in partnership

This approach is for jointly produced or supported communications materials or events that strategically present the UN as a single entity. This presentation features the UN's identity, represented by the UN logo, with supporting agencies in subordinate prominence through the use of logos or an alphabetical attribution list.

- **This mode of presentation might be used when entities, including integrated UN missions, are accountable partners for communications production.** The UNCT logo may be placed on the cover, and participating agencies can be listed on the inside front cover or back cover in alphabetical order. Roles might be described as such: “produced by/ organized by/under the leadership of/funded by.” This coordinated presentation features multiple agency identities and conveys that the agencies worked together in partnership or co-authored the published materials.

**For non-integrated UN missions:** The use of the UNCT logo with the Special Political Mission logo is allowed.



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- **Presenting individual agencies separately**

In this mode of presentation, UN agencies should use a separate, singular identity presentation that shows one agency logo and brand, following agency-specific guidance for mandate-specific communications.<sup>4</sup> Coordination may still be achieved using mandate-specific communication products by engaging in joint planning of the communication materials. Each agency communicates a country priority through the lens of its own mandate and with its own brand presentation. For example, when speaking on water and sanitation, a WHO publication may focus on this issue from a health perspective, while a UNICEF publication may focus on how water and sanitation impact children and the FAO/WFP section can discuss food security.

4 Not all agencies have brand requirements

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### **Presenting the UNCT logo in partnership with non-UN entities**



In the spirit of the UN development reform and aligned with the Secretary-General's vision, UN entities are always encouraged to join UNCT communications efforts, coming together with the common UNCT brand. While branded as UNCT, products such as press releases, can mention the UN entities' role up-front, with clear visibility for entities involved. This visual identity is also clearly conveyed on UNCT websites and social media accounts, while communicating results of UN entities' joint work.

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## 04. United Nations Communications Group at Country Level



The UNCT, drawing on guidance from DGC and UNSDG, oversees the establishment and work of the UN Communications Group (UNCG) in that country.

The UNCG does not supersede or replace the communications efforts of individual agencies. It enhances these individual efforts by pooling communication resources and expertise; coordinating public information, social mobilization, advocacy and media campaigns; and promoting coherent messaging.

The UNCG serves as a forum that helps all UNCT members think and act together. While varying from country to country, a UNCG typically serves as a coordination mechanism that ensures that agency communications are complementary rather than contradictory or competitive. There are various options for establishing a UNCG, such as pooling inter-agency human resources on communications, creating dedicated UN country positions on communications, or maintaining an active e-network of communications focal points across agencies. Recognizing the uneven communications capacities within agencies, any communications coordination mechanisms must be flexible to ensure sustainability. (See [UNCG SOP/ToRs](#))



To better enable the UNCG to fulfil the Secretary-General's vision of a post-reform setting with a new generation of UNCTs lifted by a new generation of UNCTs, this Guideline recommends that:

- All UNCG members, in agreement with their supervisors, include **a goal in their performance management document** to reflect their time, work and results, collaborating with the UNCG.
- All UNCT members (UN entities signatory to the Cooperation Framework) nominate one focal point to be a member and regularly participate in UNCG planning and activities. **Therefore, the UNCG composition should mirror the UNCT composition – including entities not physically present – to make the most of strategic communications throughout the cycle of the Cooperation Framework.**
- It is recommended that **the chair of the UNCG is the Resident Coordinator, head of UN entity (UNCT representative), the Special Representative of the Secretary-General or the international-level Director of the UN Information Centre. If that's not possible, the UNCG should be chaired by the senior-most communications colleague in the UNCG.**
- **It is recommended that the chair of the UNCG joins the UNCT meeting** and frequently updates UNCT senior leaders on the work around communications, providing feedback to the UNCG for alignment and fine-tuning of the Group's work.
- If the RC does not chair the UNCG on a regular basis, it is recommended that **she/he joins UNCG meetings** at least once every quarter to convey the important role of the group to lift the UNCTs' work.





## 05. Joint Communication Strategy

The purpose of a joint communications strategy is to strengthen inter-agency cooperation, ensure consistency of messaging, and increase the profile and transparency of UN activities at the national level. Such a strategy strives to position the UN as efficient, effective and results-oriented. As much as possible, it focuses on norm- and issue-based communications to strengthen UNCT messages and products. The strategy should be flexible enough to respond to emergencies and crises and to anticipate risks.

The strategy is based on the Cooperation Framework outcomes, aligned with national development priorities and UN system priorities. It should be in line with the UN Global Communications Strategy and approved by the UNCT. It should address the “what” from the Cooperation Framework. In addition, to tackle priority issues within the country, UNCGs should also develop specific communications strategies, following the approach outlined by the UN Global Communications Strategy. [See the Guidelines for Communications and advocacy strategy for the Cooperation Framework]



Reviewing the strategy annually and monitoring performance frequently using key performance indicators (KPI) helps ensure its constant alignment with relevant national priorities and developments. The strategy includes objectives linked to the Cooperation Framework, key messages based on target audiences and communications axes, as well as budgeted activities to achieve the goals. It should also integrate a coordination mechanism that reflects each actor’s responsibilities and partners, as well as a monitoring and evaluation framework. The joint communications strategy is developed by the UNCG through a consultative process and approved by the UNCT.

UNCTs’ performance on joint communications – or “Communicating Together” – will be assessed every year and reported as part of the UNSDG Chair’s report on the Development Coordination Office/Resident Coordinator System.

### **Content of a Joint Communications Strategy:**

The content of a joint communications strategy can be found in the UNCT Communications Strategy, the Guidelines for Communications and advocacy strategy for the Cooperation Framework

# 06. Annex

## Communications and advocacy in the Management and Accountability Framework (MAF) of the UN development and Resident Coordinator system

### Working Relationship(s)

- The RC coordinates UNCT system-wide communications efforts with due regard to relevant roles and responsibilities of individual agencies, to promote and advocate for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in all its dimensions and the commitment to leave no one behind.
- The RC/UNCT promote and advocate fundamental values, standards and principles of the UN Charter, including respect for and protection of human rights and gender equality and advocacy on the commitment to 'leave no one behind' and reaching the furthest behind first,<sup>5</sup> ensuring a strategic and coherent approach, with due regard to relevant roles and responsibilities of individual agencies.
- The RC and UNCT members protect national staff from undue pressure and human rights violations from the government, especially in the absence of a senior international agency representative as part of their duty of care responsibilities.
- Under the RC's strategic leadership, UNCT members fulfill and integrate normative and advocacy work in the areas of their mandate, in line with agreed specific working arrangements. and in consultation with the RC in exceptional and sensitive cases.

### Accountabilities for Results

- Under the leadership of the RC, UNCTs implement a common UNCT communication strategy to support the achievement of the 2030 Agenda based on the Cooperation Framework outcomes and aligned to the UN's Global Communications Strategy, as outlined in UNSDG guidelines on Communicating Together and without prejudice to the right and ability of each separate entity to communicate and advocate, under their own name and logos, for their mandates.
- Communications focal points in UNCT member entities participate actively in the UN Communications Group.
- RC and UNCT members' performance assessment systems include performance indicators relating to of the following: communications and outreach on the SDGs, promoting norms, advocating for human rights and gender equality (drawing on the UNCT SWAP Gender Equality Scorecard, the Youth 2030 UNCT scorecard, the UNCT scorecard on Disability Inclusion) and effective engagement with civil society and State institutions.
- Under the leadership of the RC, and with technical support of RCO, UNCTs ensure real-time reporting through UN INFO, including on results and impact of Cooperation Framework, and on disaggregated data-sharing and collaboration.

<sup>5</sup> In contexts where peacekeeping or special political missions are deployed with the RC also serving as the DSRSG this will be led by the Head of Mission.



## Working Relationship(s)

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- The RC leads the UNCT in fostering a coherent and strategic engagement on, and pursuance of, the UN's normative agenda, as per international and regional treaties and conventions, and in support of national capacity development, in accordance with relevant mandates and responsibilities.
- The RC and UNCT take active steps to ensure inclusive and transparent communications, access to information and outreach to stakeholders in all sectors, with due focus on groups at risk of being left behind, in recognition to the UN system's accountability to the populations it serves.
- The RC leads and enhances strategic communication and advocacy efforts by UNCT members that advance UN system efforts and collective results to achieve the UN Cooperation Framework, to promote the 2030 Agenda, and to generate positive public support and ownership.
- The RC and UNCT members work with government, regional organizations, UN entities (including integrated UN presences), NGOs, trade unions and employer's organizations, the private sector, media, networks of youth, women, faith-based organizations and other leaders, and relevant CSO actors, to ensure that they take humanitarian concerns into due account, at times of crises and in relevant contexts.
- The senior-most UN official in a country (such as the Head of Mission/SRSG, RC or HC if distinct) is responsible and accountable for coordinating UN crisis management efforts in country. In times of crisis, a UN Communication Group crisis team is established, the chair of which also joins the UNCT crisis management team meetings.<sup>6</sup> UNCG standard operating procedures (SOPs) on crisis communications should be applied.

## Accountabilities for Results

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- The RC and UNCT members work together to position the UNCT's development work and support to achieve the 2030 Agenda in a coherent way, with a common UNCT identity and joint strategic communication and advocacy approach, as outlined in the Standard Operating Procedure on Communicating Together.
- The RC is the lead in-country spokesperson in response to public protests and sudden onset crises in absence of political/peacekeeping mission. In consultation with the RC, UNCT members may also issue statements as they pertain to – and are limited to – their entities' respective mandate. All UNCT members should align messages with the joint UN statement and ensure enhanced communications coordination with senior leadership during moments of crisis. RCs should consult with UNCT members on sensitive issues that fall under the entity's mandate.
- UN Information Centres support the RC and UNCT in developing and implementing the respective country communications and advocacy plan.

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<sup>6</sup> Refer to the UNCG Crisis Communications Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and the Communications Guidelines on Social Protest.



The United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) unites the 37 UN funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments and offices that play a role in development.

At the country level, 132 UN Country Teams serving 162 countries and territories work together to increase the synergies and joint impact of the UN system.

The UN Development Coordination Office (DCO) serves as the secretariat for the UN Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) at the regional and global levels. DCO provides managerial and oversight functions for resident coordinators. Its activities are advanced through collective ownership by the UNSDG.

The Office acts as a key conduit for supporting the UN's activities for sustainable development, which inform policy, programme and operations on the ground.

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