

EVALUATION SERVICE

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Evaluation of the cross-organizational strategy on communicating FAO's messages

FAO's communication strategy

FAO's Strategic Framework includes a Vision Statement, which states that: "Over the next 15 years, FAO will be an effective communicator and advocate for its own goals and those of its members". This links effective communication to advocacy and distinguishes them from information, an important difference in the context of FAO's work. "Communicating FAO's messages" is one of the six cross-organizational strategies in this document and it states that:

"Communication must be regarded as an integral part of FAO's substantive programmes. The effectiveness and credibility of the Organization... depend to a considerable degree on its ability to communicate. FAO cannot rely on the influence of a knowledgeable few to sell the added value of the Organization to others... FAO needs to communicate general messages related to its overall mandate, as well as specific messages directed towards particular audiences or related to the priorities of the Organization."

The evaluation examined how FAO's messages are shaped and disseminated through the printed press, radio and television, FAO's Web sites, flagship "state-of-the-world" publications, World Food Day, the TeleFood Programme, FAO Goodwill Ambassadors, and National FAO Committees and Associations. Messages addressing a technical professional audience, including technical information products, were not covered as they fall under the heading of "information".

Findings

The 1996 World Food Summit (WFS) represented a landmark in communicating FAO's messages. It attracted considerable attention from governments, media and public opinion on the prevalence of hunger in the world, the moral and practical imperatives to reduce it and the possibilities of doing so through focusing on food security and reducing it through agricultural and rural development. The WFS fully identified FAO with its name as the United Nations organization devoted to both food and agriculture. Energetic follow-up of the WFS prevented the food security message from receding. The WFS: *five years later* in 2001, the Special Programme for Food Security, TeleFood, World Food Day and the FAO Ambassadors Programme were all used by FAO to sustain advocacy on food security.

In 1999 the new Corporate Communication Policy and Strategy was launched with the stated aim of creating a communication culture in FAO. A new Corporate Communication Committee was established to coordinate implementation of the policy and to review and monitor departmental communication and publishing plans. Through this exercise, the Information Division (GII) has increased its efficiency and its relationships with other units of FAO. There was

a general difficulty in distinguishing messages from issues, events and priorities and the creation of a communication culture has been a learning exercise for all those involved. Only the latest Communication Plan for 2005 came close to what such a plan should be. A disconnect still remains, however, between mutually complementary top-down and bottom-up approaches in planning. The departmental and regional plans should not only feed into the corporate plan but also reflect its corporate-level messages in addition to their own priority messages. However, the formulation of corporate messages remains largely a headquarters exercise of the Information Division.

FAO flagship “state-of-the-world” publications on food insecurity, agriculture, forestry, fisheries and trade are beginning to emerge as powerful advocates of carefully argued and balanced messages and the FAO Web site is also important. It is the most visited site in the UN system, but could be more attractive and used more as a communication tool as distinct from an information resource.

Communication through the media with the issue of press releases, print articles, radio and video material, etc. is the responsibility of the Information Division. However, there is little effort to monitor the outcomes of this work through, for example, a systematic review of press coverage and monitoring of the uptake of radio and television material.

Goodwill Ambassadors have played the role of promoting FAO and its work, while enhancing public awareness about hunger in the world. Limited human and financial resources and the busy work schedules of most of the Ambassadors have, however, limited their involvement. World Food Day represents a major opportunity for communicating FAO’s messages as it is celebrated in countries around the world, often with a high degree of involvement of national authorities.

The TeleFood fund-raising programme was launched in 1997 as a follow-up to the WFS, and it has evolved to manage a wide range of diversified fund-raising and awareness-raising activities through Web sites, concerts and other cultural events, e-mailing and text messaging and small events at the community level. Although positive overall, TeleFood’s relative isolation from the rest of FAO and the communication strategy has tended to reduce its effectiveness. The complexity of its double mandate of fund raising and awareness raising, as well as the multiplicity of its activities, has led to the decision to undertake a separate evaluation of this programme following the present evaluation.

The overall assessment of FAO’s communication efforts in terms of visibility and image showed that while the FAO Web site is quite successful by UN system standards, some non-governmental organizations have a much better exposure on hunger issues. Visibility is also still low with regard to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A press review covering major newspapers and journals in 36 countries for the year 2004 identified 932 articles where FAO was mentioned. In their comments, the journalists of the surveying agency underlined the general image of FAO in these articles as a reliable, credible and serious organization that could speak with authority on food and agriculture.

Recommendations

■ **Strategic planning.** It is crucial for FAO to build a truly **corporate strategy for communication and advocacy** that brings the resources of the Organization together for key campaign impact points while facilitating the integrated communication of FAO's more detailed technical policy messages, which are central to the performance of its mandate. FAO should develop genuine **corporate rolling communication plans**, possibly on a biennial rather than annual basis. Such plans must integrate top-down and bottom-up planning, distinguish communication from information and be widely publicized among staff and member countries.

■ **Corporate approach.** Brainstorming would help to **crystallize messages at the corporate level**, including input from the departmental and regional levels. The assistance of communication specialists would be helpful in shaping the messages and, in so doing, training key staff in the specialized domain of communication. The Office of the Director-General should be the driving force behind **a cross-organizational participatory exercise** that examines FAO's communication strategy. A rationalization of the institutional arrangements for communication would be appropriate, following overall decisions on the communication strategy. Interim measures may be taken to reduce the institutional isolation of TeleFood and to adjust non-staff resources away from television/video production and into partnering. **Closer interaction between the Information Division and senior corporate management** would strengthen FAO's ability to communicate effectively. Communication should cease to be a separate activity within FAO.

■ **Communication channels.** Key messages must be shaped through a much more collegial process, as there cannot be good external communication without **good internal communication**. If FAO is to take its development agenda forward, it needs not only to **incorporate communication in its approach to delivering its policy message** at departmental, regional and country levels, but also to drive a **policy advocacy agenda at global level**. This requires a limited number of organization-wide campaigns that have full corporate ownership. While the main drive of FAO communication around world hunger issues in the WFS had a very positive impact on FAO's image, new issues and topics have since emerged, such as the Right to Adequate Food, an approach that has the potential to renew many key corporate messages.

The extent to which **FAO flagship publications** can deliver key messages aligned with the corporate communication strategy should be further explored, including ways of reaching wider audiences and media coverage. Further efforts are needed to make the **FAO**

Web site more effective, including exploring the potential for delivering "punchy" messages on the home page and cautious use of advertising throughout the Web site.

A "quantum leap" is needed in **FAO media relations with television**, through a relaxation of FAO approaches to partnerships with TV broadcasters and sponsors. This would require a different orientation needing less staff but concentrating on contractual arrangements rather than on FAO stand-alone productions. More generally, for the print press, radio and television, FAO should shift from "standard" information dissemination to **targeted communication**, adapted to the characteristics of the different audiences and key journalists. In developing countries, FAO should work selectively, **integrating work with the media with FAO policy priorities** (e.g. inclusion of agriculture in Poverty Reduction Strategies). Newsworthy projects, including those concerned with policy and demonstration, should include a **communication budget**.

To become a truly world day, the **World Food Day theme** should be developed with the other UN food agencies and partners. Such joint planning should be rolling and at least two years in advance. This also implies a close relationship between World Food Day and the International Alliance Against Hunger, and a stronger link between World Food Day themes and FAO's integrated communication strategy. While national World Food Day committees are useful to mobilize effort at the country level, the system of National FAO Committees should not be pursued, pending further study. Rather, National Associations bringing together state and non-state partners should be explored, but only where there is a genuine national interest and a national champion. FAO liaison offices and country representations should have a greater role in communication activities. FAO should **concentrate on fewer Goodwill Ambassadors** drawn from the most active, and further develop contractual agreements for their duties and responsibilities.

Management response to the evaluation

Management wholeheartedly welcomed the evaluation as a means to improve both the focus and the effectiveness of the communication process. It broadly accepted the recommendations made, with the following comments:

- Elimination of in-house video production capacity may represent an unacceptable loss of editorial control and institutional memory, and possibly be less cost-effective.
- There is an inherent contradiction between narrowing the focus of communication messages and targeted audiences, and FAO's mandate of global information provision.
- Renouncing sole ownership of the World Food Day theme by sharing responsibility with other UN food agencies would mean FAO might not be able count on World Food Day as a central focus of its communication campaign.

FAO Governing Bodies' conclusions (Programme Committee)

The Committee found the evaluation comprehensive, bringing out a number of key issues, in particular the inadequate overall understanding of and commitment to communication throughout the Organization and the relative fragmentation of effort. It noted that the management response should have articulated a time-bound operational implementation plan, and that the recommendations of the evaluation itself could have been more operational. The Committee also acknowledged that in order to ensure the efficacy of the communication function, adequate resources needed to be allocated.

The Committee expressed general agreement with the recommendations, adding the following:

- The roles of both advocacy and communication need to be more clearly defined.
- More impetus and flexibility should be provided to encourage communication activities by staff to diverse audiences and fora. Training to support this is essential, especially for FAO country representatives.
- FAO's Internet home page should be more user-friendly, with more attention given to translation on departmental pages, particularly into Arabic. The Committee noted, however, that many audiences in developing countries did not have effective computer access, and thus traditional means of distribution of FAO publications remains important.
- FAO should contribute to a UN system-wide advocacy and communication strategy, focusing on internationally agreed goals, in particular the MDGs.
- Resources need to be devoted to monitoring uptake of FAO's communication outputs.
- The FAO Ambassadors Programme would benefit from a more focused approach.
- Further evaluation of TeleFood is required, and some members queried whether FAO should be putting limited resources into direct fund-raising.

References

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