

TAKEAWAYS

Promoting Partnerships in Tense Times

2023 DevCom Annual Meeting



Hosted by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), this year's DevCom Annual Meeting in Madrid was the first held outside of Paris since 2012!

The two-day event brought together 41 development communication specialists from 28 different institutions in 15 countries.

In a combination of expert panels, peer learning workshops and group challenges, participants grappled with the rapid shifts that communicators face today: in policy priorities, geopolitics and the communications profession as a whole.

Our conversations made clear that, amid poly-crises and in a saturated media environment, DevCom members need fresh ways to reach their diverse audiences. Participants shared lots of ideas on how to do just that.

OVERVIEW

This document summarises the key takeaways from the Annual Meeting, in four groups:

1

Aligning strategies with organisational missions

Communications is “mission critical” to achieve an organisations’ policy objectives. We need to ensure that the governance of communications can make this possible.

2

Shifting the narrative

Development co-operation needs to be reframed as part of a much broader set of policy challenges. New narratives must emphasize inclusivity and partnership.

3

Navigating the new media

Development communicators need the right tools and skills to operate effectively in a radically changed - and challenged - media landscape.

4

Using the DevCom network

Members should take full advantage of DevCom to achieve all of these aims and more.

Development communicators are invited to contact the [DevCom Secretariat](#) at any time to find expertise in the Network, pitch a research project, co-host an event, and to share their knowledge and experience through speaking slots or guest blogposts for the [SDG Communicator](#).



1: ALIGNING STRATEGIES WITH ORGANISATIONAL MISSIONS

Development organisations are stretched. They need to pursue long-term objectives like the Sustainable Development Goals but are increasingly called on to address a diversity of humanitarian emergencies, conflicts, and other crises.

This new “crisis mode” has enormous implications for development communicators, who need to elaborate a coherent narrative and organisational brand, but also need to respond nimbly to unexpected short-term events that attract high levels of media attention.

Media-savvy reputation management and crisis communications have become mission-critical: an organization cannot operate if it cannot be trusted.

The tense geo-political landscape creates further challenges, with many providers of development co-operation facing a lack of trust in partner countries. Their communications efforts have traditionally focused on audiences “at home”. Today, they need to help their organisations strike a complex balance abroad: promoting values like human rights, gender equality and democracy, while also building alliances with actors who do not necessarily share those values.

Organisations also need to operate in a media environment marked by disengagement from the media and mis- and disinformation on an unprecedented scale. Fear has opened the door to conspiracy theories, which often win out on digital platforms with algorithms that prioritise sensational content and engagement.

All of this means that communications is no longer just a “nice to have”. The distinction between development communications and corporate communications is no longer valid. Discussions focused on **three ways for communicators to help their organisations achieve core objectives.**

1. Anticipate and prepare for crises

Many organizations do not yet have a crisis communications strategy. Without such a strategy, communicators can be taken by surprise. They risk accidentally sharing incorrect information or failing to share any at all. This leaves organizations looking unprepared or out of touch.

Better anticipating crises can help communicators free up space to focus on consistent messaging on the long-term goals of development co-operation. Participants shared several suggestions for getting ahead of crises:

- **Don't be afraid to communicate:** Though it may be uncomfortable, extreme situations may require organisations to communicate with the public and the press before they have as much information as they would like. This can be as simple as acknowledging the unfolding crisis and assuring the public that the situation is being closely monitored.

- **Prepare where possible:** While no one can predict the future, there are ongoing geo-political tensions for which organisations should have relevant facts and figures at hand. Communicators can prepare an hour-by-hour response playbook, with details on what kind of messages need to be shared and when.
- **Work together and learn from others:** Where possible, coordinating responses with other organisations can be a powerful amplification strategy, and can ensure that more people hear one coherent message. NGOs can be good examples to follow as they have considerable experience responding quickly to crises.

2. Fight mis- and disinformation

The fight against disinformation will be particularly important in 2024, a “bumper” election year in which billions of people around the world will exercise their democratic rights and vote. Here are some ideas that arose during the Annual Meeting:

- **Make it resonate:** Organizations that spread mis- and dis-information on social media use human stories to tug at people’s emotions – an extremely successful communications strategy. While never leaving facts aside, development communicators need to be able to engage with audiences on an emotional level.
- **Make it fast:** Development communicators need to get to audiences before false narratives have a chance to spread, pushing back on them as soon they appear. This means closely monitoring the digital conversation to quickly spot disinformation and understand what is being said to whom.
- **Support journalism:** Communicators can help create an environment where mis- and disinformation is harder to spread. This includes [supporting an independent media](#), including through media partnerships. These partnerships should provide journalists with more direct access to key initiatives and information that they can report on.

DevCom resources on the media landscape

Discussion Note: [Fighting Mis- and Disinformation: 7 Steps for Development Communicators](#)

Comms Guidance: [Communicating in a New Media Landscape: 5 Ways to Help Journalists Help Us](#)

Interview: [Shaping Development Stories: A Q&A with OECD Communicators](#)

Guest blogpost by Jo Elsom, Lead, and Prashanth Pillay, Research and Evaluation Manager at ABC International Development: [From “Talk & Tell” to “Listen & Learn”: Building Media Partnerships in and with the Pacific Region](#)

- **Help create a more humane internet:** Current business models need to change. We need online safety standards and privacy by design. And development communicators, too, have a key role to play. Communicators can help by:
 - **Tracking and mapping** the spread of mis- and disinformation.
 - **Designing communication strategies** that keep citizens informed and debunk myths.
 - **Building environments** where mis- and disinformation cannot spread. This includes efforts to support global campaigns designed to promote a more humane internet.

3. Strengthen organisational set-ups and workflows

Implementing good communications governance in a complex international organisational setting is a challenge. They also need coordination mechanisms with country offices around the world, to help understand audiences in different countries and tailor messages to them.

But what does this look like in practice? Here are some recommendations we heard at the Annual Meeting:

- **Trust country offices:** For organizations working across multiple countries, local staff are best placed to explain local audience perceptions understand local media landscapes. They should be involved in strategic planning on communications.
- **Provide a frame and get out of the way:** Staff in headquarters should orient and enable, but also need to cede control of the message. Country-based experts offices can tailor language and messages to resonate with local audiences.
- **Give local staff the right tools:** Guidelines and toolkits, produced collectively, can help unify tone and style across country offices. Local staff also need regular training. They can also benefit from peer learning via platforms like MS Teams.
- **Coordinate on operations and policy:** Communicators in headquarters need effective systems to collaborate with colleagues in operations and policy, ensuring that they are well aligned on strategic goals.



2: SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

It is time for development organisations to modernise the way they talk about development.

The narrative needs to reflect the fact that development co-operation today addresses a broad, interconnected and complex set of policy challenges. Development can no longer be described as a linear process that is entirely focused on poverty reduction. Development organisations also need to address the links and trade-offs with national and geopolitical objectives (e.g. trade or security) or global issues like migration and climate change.

A shift in narrative is important for audiences both “at home” and “abroad”. There is a growing call from partner countries to structure development co-operation as a “partnership of equals” rather than “North-South charity”. This call needs to be reflected in the terminology and frames used to describe development. The concept of South-South Cooperation can help inspire such narrative change.

The call for new narratives is not new. Many DevCom members have recognised the need for change, as evidenced by the DevCom toolkit advice on narrative options and analysis on development branding.

But today the urgency is greater than ever. At the Annual Meeting, we heard reports of growing scepticism in partner countries when it comes to the effectiveness and intentions of development cooperation, and the financing commitments of DevCom members and partners.

At the Annual Meeting, participants considered two specific examples of narrative shifts.

4. Explaining the links between development and other policy objectives

- **Link development finance and climate finance:** The climate challenge makes the development challenge more complex and daunting in partner countries. But it also connects us all. Development efforts won't succeed if we cannot manage the impacts of climate change and environmental degradation. Communicators can emphasize how:
 - **We are all connected.** Tackling the climate crisis requires international co-operation.
 - **Climate action is an opportunity for development, too**, particularly in emerging countries. Here it is important to highlight solutions rather than problems.
 - **We need to build alliances.** This is a multifaceted problem, and campaigns should bring together a broad range of stakeholders.
- **Make the link to donor countries' interests:** Citizens – as well as governments - want to understand what's in it for them, whether that be greater global security, enhanced trade, or something else. Why should our constituents be interested? Why should money be invested abroad? Communications should answer all these questions. Communicators should explain how development efforts go far beyond humanitarian aid, comprising security policy, human rights, trade and foreign policy. And these efforts have a wide range of key outcomes, including contributing to climate mitigation, and promoting sustainable trade.

5. Make development language more inclusive

Participants shared several recommendations:

- **Focus on shared outcomes and remember that everyone adds something to a partnership:** wealth, value and contribution look very different for different people.
- **Bring in as many different voices as possible:** One narrative doesn't rule them all.
- **Words matter.** We must move away from terms that have a negative, even paternalistic connotation – like “going on mission,” “in the field,” or “Global South/Global North,” which suggests a divided world.
- Remember that **“impact” is not about spending money.** Stories about development co-operation must be human-focused.
- **Share the stage:** Partnership means you are not the centre of the story.



3: NAVIGATING THE NEW MEDIA

The communications profession is changing.

In an [increasingly fragmented media environment](#), communicators must manage a growing array of distribution channels to reach niche target audiences. They need new techniques and skills to reach people who are tired by what feels like an endless deluge of bad news, causing many to tune out completely.

DevCom resources to navigate the new media

DevCom Toolkit: [Learning Area 5: Channels & Learning Area 6: Formats](#)

Comms Guidance: [When the Best Pictures are on Audio: 5 Podcasting Tips from OECD DevCom](#), [Event Summary: Viral Video and Visual Branding](#) & [Going visual: A playlist of videos from the DevCom community](#)

Guest blogpost by Monique Tummers, Senior Communication Advisor at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs: [When Influencers Move Much More than Make-Up](#)

Trust in institutions, governments and media is at an all-time low. With the rise of the platform ecosystem, traditional journalism is weakened, creating “news deserts” in many markets. Many of our traditional media partners are behind a paywall for citizens who cannot afford it.

Amid all of this, AI has drastically changed the media landscape in ways we do not yet fully understand. Some participants have begun experimenting with generative AI, while others are developing ethical codes and roles to address its risks.

At the Annual Meeting, communicators shared ideas on how to reach audiences, and how to source and generate great content, particularly the video or visual content that tends to make the biggest impact.

6. How to communicate: Talk to news-fatigued audiences on their terms.

- **Tell the human story:** too few stories have a human face – stories that succeed put the emphasis on *people*.
- **Emphasize results:** Communications must go beyond talking about money and [focus on impact](#), particularly in an environment of aid budget cuts. People want to know *what worked, what didn't and what's next*.
- **Focus on positivity amid crisis:** [Hope is a strategy](#), and no one wants to join a lost cause. As development communicators, we have an inspiring “product” to sell.
- **Leverage universal interests:** Campaigns can use crowd-pleasers like [sports](#), cooking, arts and culture to reach people who are harder to convince. And don't be afraid to make it fun. We discussed the potential of reality TV and entertainment education.
- **Keep it simple:** [Avoid jargon](#) and break down complex information for the public.

- **Offer solutions:** Give people something to act on, particularly when it comes to SDGs. Communicators should help citizens understand that international cooperation is part of the solution to the problems they face.
- Finally, the content shared needs to **align with your audience's *values***.



4: USING THE DEVCOM NETWORK

We are a strong international network of experts and potential partners. We need to seize this opportunity. Based on feedback at the Annual Meeting, the Secretariat is designing a new calendar of activities for 2024 and has already begun preparing for the next Annual Meeting, together with our hosts at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

In 2024, DevCom activities will align with the agreed 2023-2024 Work Programme and its three work streams: Learning with Others, Going Global, and Campaigning Together. We will continue to foster peer learning among members and with experts, deepen our understanding of how development organisations are perceived around the world, and work to coordinate our campaigns on development co-operation and key global issues.

7. Working together in 2024

During the 2023 Annual Meeting, participants shared valuable suggestions and ideas for upcoming events and activities of the network. Here are some ideas for each workstream:

- **Learning with others:** We will organise two series of virtual events. The first will look at trends in media and communications and their implications for DevCom members. The second will look at key policy issues that DevCom members need to communicate on. Topics will include:
 - Best practices for Generative AI.
 - Formats for communicating on data and evaluation.
 - Communicating for climate finance. Narratives for conflict and humanitarian crises.
 - Strategies to rebrand.
- **Going Global:** We will continue looking at different regions, understanding regional media landscapes, identifying partners and taking stock of latest development policy debates. For these events, we invite representatives from both headquarters and regional/country offices. One key topic will be the fight against mis- and disinformation in year with major elections around the world.
- **Campaigning Together:** This is a work stream primarily designed for social media managers. We will discuss social media trends in 2024 and coordinate our efforts through the [DevCom Trello Board](#). Together, we will work on key moments:
 - **March**, International Women's Day
 - **April**, launch of OECD ODA statistics
 - **June**, World Environment Day
 - **September**, the Summit of the Future
 - **November**, COP-29

If you wish to add more international dates to our joint effort, [let us know!](#)



Take advantage of DevCom resources!

The [Toolkit for Development Communicators](#), with valuable communication advice from DevCom members and partners.

Regular online events that offer opportunities to **network and exchange with practitioners** across policymaking, campaigning and advocacy; experts on marketing and behavioural science; researchers; and civil society organisations.

[The SDG Communicator blog](#), that features examples of successful SDG campaigns from around the world.

Research and analysis on the latest [public attitudes research](#) and [surveys](#).

[A monthly newsletter](#) with details of global campaigns, news from the DevCom community, and the latest research insights.

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