

Crisis communications: Role of centres of government and ministries of health

Public communication is a critical government function that enables coherent messaging both within the administration and externally, and serves as a key tool for effective policy design and implementation. Public communication also allows governments to listen to and understand their citizens. It is key to supporting the open government principles of transparency, integrity, accountability and stakeholder participation, ultimately serving to enhance good governance and build citizen trust.

Effective communication during a crisis is essential to the timely and beneficial dissemination of critical information to the public. Governments undertake crisis communication in response to unexpected events that could negatively affect their reputation or endanger citizens. It takes diverse forms, including media briefings, press releases and conferences as well as information campaigns about the facts and measures taken, and explaining the government's crisis response to citizens. In the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, communication from centres of government (CoGs) and ministries of health (MHs) played a key role in fostering knowledge of and compliance with measures adopted to ensure people's health and safety.

In 2019, 18 out of 27 CoGs in OECD countries (67%) had defined crisis communication procedures, as did 13 out of 17 MHs (76%) (Figure 4.5). CoGs' specific manuals or procedures include crisis communication frameworks (e.g. the United Kingdom's emergency planning framework), dedicated factsheets (the Netherlands), or sections on communication in wider crisis response plans (France) and frameworks (Australia and Belgium), acts (Switzerland and Luxembourg) and policies (Canada). In countries with no specific written criteria, some rely on adapting existing procedures to the nature of the incident, as in the Czech Republic, Estonia and Mexico. In Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada and Germany, it is a shared responsibility between national and sub-national governments and is often – though not always – guided by CoG protocols or procedures.

Public communicators consider crisis communication one of their three most challenging competences in 15 out of 27 CoGs (56%) and 9 out of 18 MHs (50%) in OECD countries (Figure 4.6). Co-ordination and human resources are the key challenges to implementing crisis communications: 12 CoGs and 6 MHs cited co-ordination as a reason why communicating during a crisis is demanding, 11 CoGs and 4 MHs cited human resources, and 10 CoGs and 3 MHs a combination of both (Figure 4.7).

Methodology and definitions

Data were collected from centres of government in 27 OECD countries, plus Brazil, Costa Rica and Romania, and from ministries of health in 18 OECD

countries, plus Romania, through the OECD 2020 survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government, which covered the year 2019. The responses of four CoGs (Belgium, Estonia, Korea and Poland) and two MHs (Greece and Ireland) also included COVID-19 related measures adopted in 2020. Respondents were senior officials in charge of communication at the centre of government, i.e. the bodies that provide direct support and advice to heads of government and councils of ministers, and in ministries of health.

Public communication is understood as any communication activity led by public institutions for the public good. It is distinct from political communication, which refers to political parties, debates or elections.

A crisis is a threat to operations or reputations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly. Crises can create three related threats: to public safety, financial loss and reputation loss. Crisis communications are undertaken by governments with the public and stakeholders when an unexpected event occurs.

Further reading

OECD (2020), "Transparency, communication and trust: The role of public communication in responding to the wave of disinformation about the new Coronavirus", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/bef7ad6e-en>.

OECD (2020), "Building resilience to the Covid-19 pandemic: The role of centres of government", *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19)*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/883d2961-en>.

OECD (2016), *Trends in Risk Communication Policies and Practices*, OECD Reviews of Risk Management Policies, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264260467-en>.

Figure notes

Finland, Greece, Iceland, Japan, Luxembourg, Portugal and Spain provided data for MHs but not CoGs. Austria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United Kingdom provided data for CoGs but not MHs.

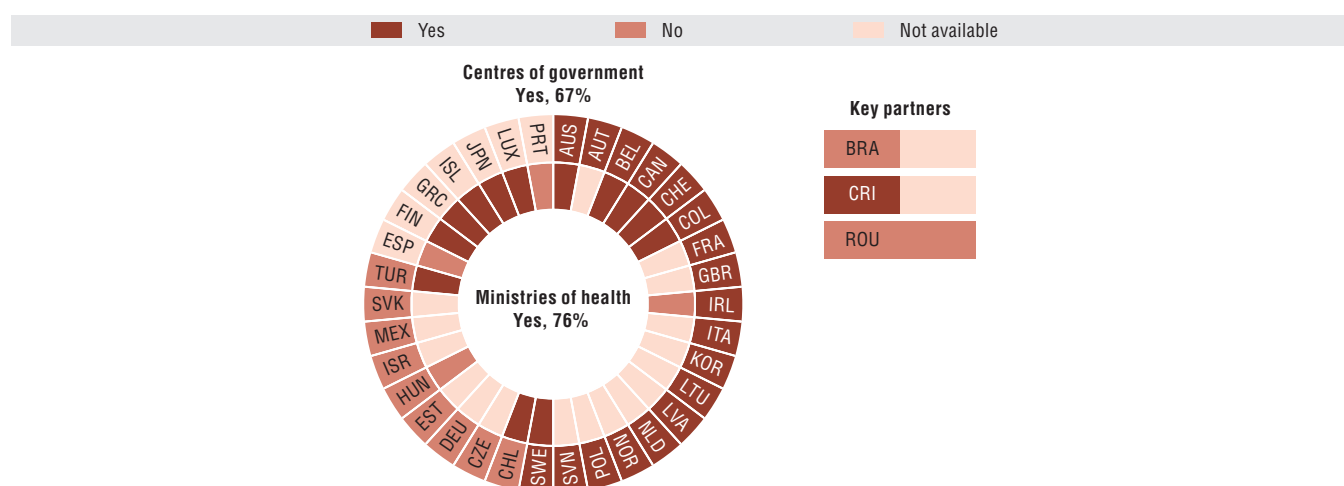
4.5. Data for Lithuania's Ministry of Health are not available. The outer ring shows the data for CoGs, and the inner ring the data for MHs.

4.6. The three alternatives presented are the top recurring challenges selected by respondents from 27 CoGs and 18 MHs out of all the options provided.

4.7. Data refer to the 15 CoGs and 8 MHs that indicated crisis communication is a challenge in 4.6. and chose human resources and/or co-ordination as the reason. Greece's MH did not answer.

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4.5. Availability of standard protocols or procedures to respond to crises in OECD countries, 2019



Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government.

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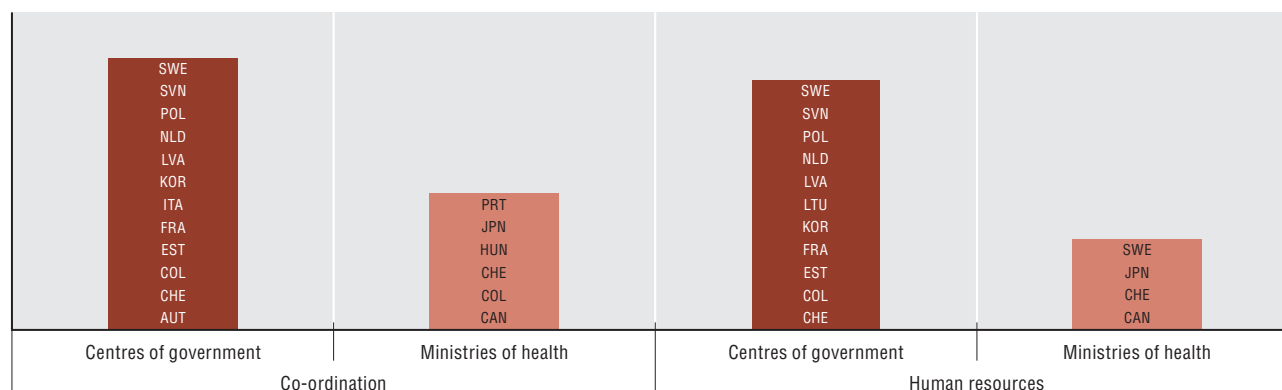
4.6. Three most challenging communication competences for centres of government and ministries of health, 2019

Communicating during a crisis Centres of Government	AUT	BEL	CHE	CHL	COL	EST	FRA	ITA	KOR	LVA	LTU	NLD	POL	SVN	SWE	CoGs: 56%
Communicating during a crisis Ministries of health	CAN	COL	CHE	ESP	GRC	HUN	JPN	PRT	SWE	MHS: 50%						
Producing government-wide communication strategies Centres of Government	BEL	CHE	CHL	FRA	IRL	ITA	LVA	LTU	MEX	NLD	SVK	SVN	CoGs: 44%			
Producing government-wide communication strategies Ministries of health	BEL	CHL	CHE	ESP	HUN	ISL	IRL	JPN	LTU	LUX	SWE	TUR	MHS: 67%			
Implementing government-wide communication plans Centres of Government	CHE	CHL	COL	FRA	IRL	LVA	MEX	NOR	SVK	CoGs: 33%						
Implementing government-wide communication plans Ministries of health	CHL	FIN	GRC	HUN	ISL	IRL	LTU	SWE	MHS: 44%							

Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934257717>

4.7. Reasons why crisis communication is challenging for centres of government and ministries of health, 2019



Source: OECD (2020), Survey on Understanding Public Communication in Centres of Government.

StatLink <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934257736>



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