„Making progress in communicating progress"

Example of innovative approaches in communicating data and statistics for 2030 Agenda by the Task Team on Communication on Communication of Statistics for SDGs of the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seems to be easy to communicate. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals are so powerful *per se* that one could think the messages they carry are relatively easy to spread. And it might be a rightful thinking if it wasn't for statistics and data. From the outset, assessing the 2030 Agenda from the communication point of view, the fact of entrusting the ownership of the Goals to the countries and, consequently, making the National Statistical Offices accountable for providing information necessary to measure the distance to the Goals accomplishment, was a genius move. However, it is well known that data – as much as they are vital for governments, media, academia and citizens – are not easy to understand if they are not well communicated. So, the challenge is not in communicating the SDGs, but in communicating data and statistics for SDGs.

We need data for decision-making, we need it for policy making, we need it for measuring progress, which is vital to materialising the 2030 Agenda. In the data-driven world, NSOs – in the process of expanding their roles - have been navigating towards a more inclusive approach to data and information governance systems. They are not "institutes for numbers" anymore, but are, in fact, becoming knowledge hubs, service providers and story tellers.

There have been many fantastic data stories about the Agenda 2030. However, the problem was lying in their dispersion, scattered character, sometimes oblivion. Therefore, international organisations play an active role to gather countries, to make them talk and exchange ideas for a common benefit. One of those efforts is bringing remarkable results: under the *aegis* of the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics For Sustainable Development Goals a Task Team on Communication of Statistics for SDGs (TTCOM) is operating. Besides many [interesting deliverables](#) (provided in the framework of an ad hoc Task Team 2021-2022 and focused on communicating the [Roadmap on Statistics For SDGs](#)), the group has been successfully and innovatively trying to implement its primary objective – which is establishing a lively and vivid SDG community with the emphasis put on communication.

This paper will expand the ideas of our presentation which is about guiding the audience through our journey of "making progress in communicating progress", in the spirit of synergies with other UNECE communications groups, bearing in mind the need to exchange ideas which, as we all know, is the primary condition for boosting creativity.

Reinstatement of the Task Team on Communications of Statistics for SDGs

Following the UNECE SDG Steering Group meeting in Cork (10-11 October, 2022), it was decided to reinstate a permanent Task Team, the remit of which would be to ensure a regular exchange around the topic of communicating *SDGs sensu largo*. From the outset, the Co-Chairs were fully aware that many other communication efforts were being undertaken within different bodies and configurations. However, we believe that in communication there is no such thing as "overlapping". On the contrary, the more that is being done towards this end, the better results can be achieved. Provided that the exchange is ensured and that everyone is aware of what works are done and where, we can learn from each other and capitalise on each other's efforts. Hence, also, our presence in the DISS COMM meeting.

The Statement of Purpose (as of 14 December 2022) laid down the primary objective of the Task Team (further referenced as the TTCOM), which was: "to improve effective communication of the role and provision of statistics for SDGs to various stakeholders and thereby support implementation of the 2030 Agenda", which in fact remained unchanged since the previous Task Team dedicated to SDGs communication in the years 2016-2018.

However, in the aftermath of relevant developments, most notably: the 2nd Edition of the CES Roadmap on Statistics for SDGs (RM 2.0) and the creation of a supporting promotional kit by an ad hoc temporary Task Team operating in 2021 and the first quarter of 2022 (more about the ad-hoc Task Team will be said further in the paper), the permanent team was restored. It was re-established with a renewed purpose to further promote and facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda with adequate communication activities, materials and tools.

The reinstated Task Team proposed to undertake actions that improve the communication of statistics for SDGs and support NSOs and diverse stakeholders in effectively communicating the role of data and statistics in achieving the Goals.

It was, however, not about resuming the work from the point in which it was left in 2018. It is not an understatement to claim that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly changed our lives. Therefore, it would be erroneous to exclude our discussed topic (as well as working methods) out of this equation.

Consequently, the new Task Team suggested focusing on the following actions (with a flexible approach as regards adapting/ expanding/ limiting this catalogue):

- disseminating (in an easy-access, centralised outlet) the set of promotional materials developed by the *ad hoc* Task Team on the Promotional kit for the RM 2.0, namely: logo, hashtag, social media content, infographics, bookmarks, brochures and video;
- adapting the existing materials to the needs of various stakeholder groups (e.g. different versions of the video for different purposes);
- producing a stocktaking exercise of existing communication initiatives, focused on available tools/materials, having in mind the urgency of non-overlapping and the necessity of linking (and not dispersing) the existing initiatives;
- developing a training concept pertaining to SDG monitoring, targeting junior staff at NSOs;
- facilitating the sharing of communication experiences among UNECE countries in order to identify best practices and extant tools;
- providing guidance on enabling 'story telling' contributions from stakeholders to make national statistics on SDGs more engaging;
- elaboration of practical suggestions for the development and communication of the statistical annex to the Voluntary National Reviews, building on the work carried out by the relevant instances (e.g. UNSD, the 2018 SG Communication Subgroup);

In carrying out this work, the Task Team proposed to collaborate with existing groups related to the communication of statistics, such as the UNECE High-Level Group for the Modernisation of Official Statistics' and its relevant subgroups/ work streams, the annual UNECE meeting on dissemination approaches, and other existing bodies that were established to address the communication of statistics.

Assessing the planned activities from an "8 months" perspective, it should be said that the flexible approach is (and was) the key. The catalogue of activities/targets should not be a closed one because it largely depends on the composition of the group, of its numerosity and on the experiences which their Members can and want to share. And most essentially, in case of the TTCOM it was conditioned by the needs and wishes of the Members themselves. Therefore, we decided to adapt both the catalogue and the methods of our work to the specificity of the Task Team, which could only be done after several months of its operation. **The most important takeaway of this activity was that the newly reinstated Task Team should be a place of establishment of a community.**

Building on the existing potential – the work of the ad hoc Task Team on Communicating the Roadmap: what we achieved and what was worth continuing

It has already been mentioned that the TTCOM continues in a way the work of the former Communications Task Team of the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs, which was concluded in 2018, after making insightful contributions to both editions of the UNECE CES Road Map on Statistics for SDGs and conducting a survey on existing communication practices.

However, the current TTCOM recognises the work of the ad hoc Task Team on the Promotional kit for the RM 2.0 as the one that conditioned its reinstatement and paved the way for its expansion and continuation.

Both editions of the UNECE CES Road Map on Statistics for SDGs highlighted the importance of effective communication and identified principles that may be considered when developing a national communication approach for this purpose. Even if the communication strategy for statistics on SDGs should remain a part of the NSO's general communications strategy, further work is required to link it to the overall SDG communication strategy within the country and to broader initiatives developed worldwide.

Bearing this in mind, we found it useful to promote the unique international product which the Road Map on Statistics for SDGs undoubtedly is. The approach that was adopted was a product-related one. The ad hoc Task Team focused entirely on one product only, which was the UNECE CES Road Map on Statistics for SDGs. This approach made us see the product through a magnifying glass and try to imagine and pre-define its impact on particular user groups, if properly communicated. The result of such a method was a series of ready-to use materials, aimed at promoting the use of the Roadmap worldwide, which we called the RM 2.0 Promotional Kit. The Kit included: a video, a logo, a list of social media taglines and hashtags, ready-to-use small printed materials, such as infographics, bookmarks etc. – all of which could be easily re-used and adapted to national contexts connected with different occasions where the Road Map could

be referenced. We were successful in developing these

deliverables and in highlighting the Roadmap's key messages in appealing and user-friendly formats, ranging from infographics to the TT flagship product: a promotional video.

However, as much as this work was praised and rewarding, challenges remained in promoting its use. Moreover, while doing this communication exercise, dealing with the internationally developed common product, more complex questions and challenges started to appear. One of those was the famous communication gap that the NSOs, liable for delivering data and statistics to measure the 2030 Agenda, have been endlessly trying to bridge. How to get through with our key messages that we want to deliver?

How to become more interesting and useful for the policy makers in view of so many others advancing the same messages in maybe more appealing and attractive forms (like rankings or indexes)?

It became clear that underlying communication challenges were pending, and it was not possible to solve them all with an ad hoc approach. It required works of a more permanent and crosscutting nature. It also became evident that the SDG statistical community might benefit from increased guidance and interaction on how to make progress in communicating progress.

Another positive effect was that it evoked enthusiasm and was a true seminal moment for a community that – as we believed – should be continuously developed.

This was the context in which the TTCOM was reinstated under a renewed purpose **to further promote and facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda with adequate communication activities, materials and tools. It was suggested to be done by advancing communication initiatives and effectively delivering and disseminating existing and future materials.**

The new Task Team on Communications journey – was it always easy? Of course not!

It is beyond any doubt that people dealing with communications have a certain set of features and skills that are challenging to find elsewhere: creativity, openness, humour, empathy and enthusiasm, to name a few. These attributes, as well as their willingness to sharing their thoughts, are undeniable assets which make all the communication-related work and exchanges a relatively easy task. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that not only communication professionals are the part of the TTCOM. The overarching assumption while building the community was that it should be inclusive. We welcomed not only communication professionals but all experts whose work was connected with SDG data, to some extent. We ended up with an impressive number of Members from almost all the continents.[1]

However, we should not underestimate three foes of our current work situation, which are: work overload, different time zones and a virtual working modality. All 3 impacted our initial, pre-defined image of the group, conditioning its current shape, and are to be reflected in its evolution regarding deliverables and the common way forward.

In the inception phase, following its statement of purpose, the Co-Chairs made a significant effort to strictly observe the goals set in the document. Some future outputs were identified and operationalised accordingly. For example, an MS Teams platform was developed to become a repository of documents, as well as possible space of interaction. However, as far as the former can be considered a working solution, the latter did not work well. The Co-Chairs quickly understood that an interactive community cannot be formed via an online platform. As much common as the covered topics could be, people needed to get to know each-other to enable a real interactive exchange. Which, taking into consideration the already mentioned trio: work overload, time zones and online working methods, represented a considerable difficulty. Consequently, the Members, challenged to participate in an online whiteboard exercise, similar to brainstorming practices in the marketing field, did not feel comfortable in using the online platform for a purpose which is usually set and met in the course of a regular human exchange.

It was an important lesson to learn. The "whiteboard exercise" was aimed at providing a space for ideas, free from judgement - where "rough" ideas can be "polished", grouped together and systematised to enable the listing of feasible outputs for the team -, but turned out to be ineffective. Nevertheless, it reaffirmed the initial belief by the Co-Chairs that both the deliverables and goals of the newly reinstated task force should be set and discussed by the team and not imposed. It meant that a "business derived" agile work form needed to be adopted to make the team progress. It should build on its enthusiasm and willingness to share experiences, but bearing in mind the mentioned constraints. This is how the idea of "Fortnights" was born.

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[1] A community was built, far beyond the geographical limits of the Regional Economic Commission (AL, AT, BE, BR, CH, HU, IE, IS, LI, PL, PT, UK, USA, ZA), and even the limits of the NSO community (international organisations like UNIDO and other public data providers have joined as well, such as the ZA Forestry, Fisheries and Environment Department). The Task Team is co-chaired by Carolina Fresta Santos (Statistics Portugal) and Olga Świerkot-Strużewska (Statistics Poland).

Why is this group different than others?

Reinstating a new group dedicated to such topics like "SDGs" or "communication" always brings up a question about possible overlaps with pre-existing initiatives or other global exercises. In our case an example can be given of the SDG Data Communication examples repository, which was one of the first deliverables of the TTCOM. Indeed, the UNSD/IAEG Good Practices Repository may be considered to be of a similar nature. However, after a thoughtful revisiting of this source, it was concluded that both initiatives are far from being identical. On the contrary, the purpose of the TTCOM was different in its approach, which was product-driven, rather than a country-driven one. Indeed, some audiences (e.g. statisticians, researchers, communication practitioners etc) tend to turn their attention (and sometimes resources) to replicate best practices from a given country, deemed as advanced/role model, whereas it might be more useful to shift their focus to products and topics of interest. Despite the usefulness of the "role model" approach, a lot can be lost. There are many other fantastic products, examples and experiences which are often overlooked because they stem from less obvious origins (e.g. outside the region, unfamiliar countries, etc). Therefore, it was deemed justified to adopt the product-driven approach, and – building on the great diversity of our Members – to create a Data Comms "headquarters" for SDG-related communication products/ services or initiatives. As a result, we are progressively compiling a repository covering: e.g. VNR-related comm initiatives (products, items, activities, publications, etc.); social media campaigns, examples of posts, threads; story-telling visuals and narratives; data visualization; videos; tags; SDG-related events (target, main stakeholders involved and how to assemble/choose them – key to making engaging events) and other best practices and tools that the Team found useful to be shared.

The golden idea – fortnight meetings

What can be done when one is confronted with a large and diversified international group, with Members/observers coming from a wide range of countries – from Brazil to South Africa? Having different professional backgrounds, working according to different rules, using different online tools? All eager to learn from each other, to talk with each other, to share and exchange ideas and experiences? And naturally all very busy with daily work at home and international liabilities? Well, we already know that one cannot ask them to leave their ideas on a virtual white board. What we can do is to create a welcoming human space where all the mentioned features can be explored and thrive.

This is how the idea of fortnight meetings was born. Bearing in mind the above, but also aware that the community only develops when a certain regularity and stability are ensured, the Co-Chairs confronted the Members with the proposal of regular biweekly meetings, which would not exceed an hour and should be focused on a particular topic. The idea was simple: make it lively, make it topic driven, let people talk in an informal, friendly atmosphere. The meeting usually starts with a short introduction by a voluntary member who sets the topic and at the same time presents their national experiences and lessons learned. Then a free discussion follows, where questions can be asked, and ideas can be shared. The assumption was that the informal character and a relatively short time of these meetings, as well as their topical subject-driven nature, would always gather some interested Members but not necessarily the entire group. The Co-Chairs moderate the meetings and ensure their continuity. The meetings are recorded (accessible to members only) and the presentations and summaries feed the Data Comms Repository which is available for everyone under the UNECE Knowledge Hub on SDGs.

So far, 4 fortnight meetings took place, ranging from SDG monitoring publications, to the development of statistical annexes to Voluntary National Reviews (VNR), and finishing on a high-note before the summer break, with 2 gatherings dedicated to data visualisation. The meeting summaries available at the Data Comms repository highlight the important lessons learned in each gathering.

When it comes to the fortnight gatherings, the spirit of informal exchange that follows the informative part is particularly enriching, as well as a bottom-up approach adopted in relation to planning the meetings to come. The Co-Chairs pilot the Member's areas of interest and make attempts to plan the upcoming meetings accordingly. Another noteworthy result of the regular gatherings is the fact that the community is getting enhanced and fortified, which translates into increasing networking and facilitates

reaching out to particular Members to ask for advice or input for specific tasks/assignments, thus improving our daily work. The recordings made available by the Co-Chairs on the common TTCOM MS Teams space make the whole initiative inclusive and accessible for those Members who cannot follow the fortnights regularly or choose the topics according to their priority interest areas.

Regarding the content of our discussions, clearly a modern approach to communication is getting increasingly important in the process of efficiently transmitting the 2030 Agenda key messages. Moreover, SDGs – being a powerful, internationally relevant topic – in many cases are a trigger to transforming and modernising traditional communication channels in NSOs, to enhancing the tools and rethinking target audiences. For example, a data visualisation trend is increasingly observed globally. In fact, the SDGs-related communication experiences led in many countries to a certain shift in the sense that communication teams have been incentivised to look at data differently, not just disseminate them in a raw way and expect to get the message across, but actually **invest in visualisation and advocate for the importance of data and statistics through a marketing approach**.

It has been widely observed in recent years that **the conceptual and strategic paradigm shift in statistics**, besides touching upon governance matters, **is purely user-centric**. All the questions related to enhancing trust, quality, relevance, timeliness and shifting from number producers to service providers and story tellers call for a proper, modern, agile communication approach.

Going back to our example of data visualisation, we can claim that, nowadays, it is not possible to tell a compelling data story without proper data visuals and/or a story-telling dimension. **Data stories boost overall visibility of official statistics**: they are ranked higher than regular statistical releases in search engines and they also get a higher number of views. In some cases, more than 50% of page views of statistical releases comes from links within data stories[2].

Keeping communication meaningful requires telling technically sound stories, while challenges are often found in internal advocacy. A **closer articulation needs to be fostered between comms and data teams**. It was also interesting to note a common finding regarding the need to overcome the prejudice against the "comms work": it is not just about "making statistics pretty", but rendering them understandable, captivating and relatable, therefore increasing their use (shortening the gap between "means" and "ends"). Despite having as much merit as the rest of the production chain, communications work is quite often pressed for time and taken for granted. Whereas it should be said that without proper communication the efforts towards resonating with policy makers and boosting the statistics-policy dialogue will fail. As shown in the fortnights, our role should also be considered as a specific kind of translator, focusing on impactful and meaningful data, showcased, whenever possible, in reduced quantities, which usually appeal to both decision makers and the broader public.

Our final takeaways and considerations for the future

The case of newly reinstated Task Team on Communication of Statistics for SDGs has been used in this paper as an example of methods and tools adopted in order to advance communication initiatives and effectively deliver and disseminate existing and future materials, owned by the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs and developed for the benefit of all.

In terms of lessons learned it should be said primarily that there is a common thread of challenges in the communication world. These can be easily summed up to the **need to "simplify complex information"**, bridging the gap between the meaning of data and their interpretation and understanding by users, which are especially differentiated in the SDG context. Other recurring issues include: translating extensive efforts and achievements in data collection and treatment to the communication dimension, tailoring products to specific target groups, communication with data providers, dispersion of SDG data, VNR preparation, explaining and simplifying complex/overlapping frameworks, and internal and external SDG advocacy.

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[2] As it is the case of South Africa, where STASSA's data stories have boosted the visibility of regular statistical releases. More information in the meeting summary and presentation of the 3rd Communication Fortnight.

Secondly, the work within the Task Team taught us that even though our challenges are common, we have many different and creative ways to tackle them. Therefore, there is an immense potential for common growth and improvement. Some of the practices that we might highlight in this regard are: school and academia engagement (SDG explanatory sessions/trainings); disclaimers on data gaps; focus on commemorative days to streamline SDG communication; infographics; storytelling; data visualisation; open SDG reporting platform (and its localisation); social media presence; and finally, leveraging the VNR preparation process to rethink SDG communication products and tailor them to user-needs.

The third finding mentioned in the paper is the untapped potential of each and every TTCOM member. The existence of regional (and global) communication leads is undoubtful. However, there are valuable experiences which we can explore and get inspired by, which go far beyond the obvious role models. We want to highlight and showcase them within the Task Team. This is why the Communication Repository which the TTCOM is developing is meant to be product-driven, rather than country-driven.

And lastly, communication may be the most tangible example of the supremacy of regular human exchange over fancy digital solutions. Even though we are very proud of how quickly and efficiently the Teams platform was built, we are struggling to get the type of active, lively engagement that we see in the fortnight meetings.

Summing up, the outpour of interest, engaged participation and enthusiasm, which could be enumerated as the main features of the Task Team, prove that many of us see the need of sharing and exchanging. These are seen as the most efficient ways to improve domestic activities and products. Furthermore, for those who argue that the 2030 Agenda is losing relevance by being too ambitious, or that official statistics are too obscure and difficult to find/understand, a counterargument could be that international initiatives like the one that has been described contribute to simplifying complex topics. They become easier to apprehend by promoting the use of data through understandable and easily accessible ways. **The Task Team on Communication of Statistics for SDGs of the UNECE Steering Group on Statistics for SDGs shares the belief that better data does enable better lives. And that may well be the key to make progress in communicating progress.**