Meeting Notes – 7th Communication Fortnight

Climate data – how to reach the public

7 December 2023

The TTCOM (AL, AT, BE, CA, DE, IE, IS, PL, PT, SE, SK, UNECE, UK, ZA) gathered for its 7th fortnight, devoted to reaching the public with climate-change related data. The meeting recording and transcript are available on Teams (restricted to members) whereas the meeting summary and additional materials will be made available on the UNECE Knowledge Hub on SDGs, under the Communication page. Please note that, temporarily, credentials may be asked to enter this page (see at the end of the summary). The results from the discussion are summarised below.

Malgorzata Cwiek (UNECE Statistics Division) and Sara Svantesson (Statistics Denmark) presented the lessons learned from experience of implementing focused interviews with journalists within the work of Group D, from the UNECE Task Force on the role of NSOs in achieving national climate objectives. They evoked the importance of informing the public (stressed in the Paris Agreement) and the relevant role played by the NSOs in facilitating this advocacy, as stated in Chapter 7 of the Draft Guidance on the Role of National Statistical Offices in achieving national climate objectives. Since is not possible to interview the broader public to assess their level of awareness, journalists were identified as a useful proxy, considering the role of the media as gateway for most environmental and climate-change information and their skills in effectively communicating complex information.

This resulted in the delineation of structured interviews and ultimately in 11 successful interviews with journalists from several countries (largely corresponding to the diversity of the Task Force, which includes the following countries: Netherlands [Chair], Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Canada, Costa Rica, Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Spain, Türkiye, United Kingdom, Ukraine,…).

The following key takeaways stood out from this experiment, regarding the climate related data of most interest to the public:

1. **Wide range of interconnected topics and stories** – ranging from extreme weather events (heat waves) to climate projections, among others (impacts of climate change, energy policy, etc.).
2. **The format of communication often changes** – traditional narratives are broadly used, but also graphics and data, since climate-change is a heavily data-based topic. Mostly raw data and tables are used vis-à-vis graphs.
3. **Different sources** (NSOs quite often not the first ones) – NSOs, meteorological institutes, government bodies (Ministries or environmental agencies). NSOs' data is used, but is (too) often not the first source for many journalists.
4. **Discrepancies in data availability** - high availability of data on weather, emissions and energy vs lack of availability in climate adaptation, impact of climate change on health and nature, business and finance, carbon footprint measures.
5. **Difficulties in coverage** (data lacking for parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America), **timeliness, granularity** (local data) **and accessibility**, which is sometimes paradoxical, since while some demand for more open access to data, others prefer ready-to-use materials, like data visualisation products.

6. **Different levels of literacy within journalists** lead to inconclusive takeaways: **too little data is not good, but too much is not good either** (since it remains inaccessible or incomprehensible for less technical journalists).
7. **Different approaches to measuring some data create confusion** and further roadblocks to communicating climate-change data. Journalists are quite often not able to explain the details of the changing methodologies and sometimes stick to their favourite approach, dismissing the others.
8. **Overall conclusions** from the exercise:
    a. Difficult to be a climate journalist: some expertise required, complex subject
    b. Data from NSOs are used and appreciated, but often not the first thing that comes to mind
    c. Local and current data at the top of priorities
    d. No data vs too much data (both negative) – hard to find the proper balance
    e. Different journalistic priorities may deem that the story comes prior to the data, but data can also trigger the story.
    f. Reliable data is important but pragmatism wins;
    g. Different set of skills are needed to report on climate change and quite often hard to find in just one journalist
    h. The exercise was very useful but difficult to carry out.
9. **Way forward**:
    a. More user guidance
    b. More granularity and geospatial data
    c. Proactive outreach (e.g. social media, schools)
    d. Combining static and interactive data presentations

Malgorzata concluded the presentation by sharing a reflection from COP23 (UN Climate Change Conference), which kick-started a lively discussion: At the COP23, it became clear that the community of official statistics does not have enough visibility in the climate change domain. Even in sessions that were discussing reliable sources, NSOs were hardly mentioned or remembered as entrusted sources and data providers. It is hard to show that there are statisticians behind climate data and that the official statistics community can be a partner in disseminating trusted information to citizens.

The following takeaways/clarifications should be highlighted from the discussion:

- The presenters clarified that the selected journalists were contacted via the Communication departments from the task team's NSOs, which tried to reach different types of media outlets (more tabloid, more and less popular, etc.). A suggestion was made (and praised) about contacting media schools to get a larger pool of journalists, in future renditions of this exercise (or in national appropriations of this approach).
- Some participants shared national/international experiences with reporting climate change data and engaging visualisations of impactful data, such as:
    - Statistics Poland 2022 SDG Report - environment-focused digital report on the SDGs.
    - South African study on climate change media coverage, which highlighted the priority given by the media to extreme weather events/climate disasters and climate conferences, to the detriment of regular media coverage on the structural impacts of climate change on economics, health, politics, food security, agriculture, etc.
    - The data visualisation work of Mona Chalabi, Pulitzer prize winner for her striking illustrations that combine statistical reporting with keen statistical analysis (e.g.

depictions of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' wealth). This example was highlighted as an impactful and understandable way of communication data, which resonates with users.

- When asked about the next steps, the presenters informed that their report is being finalised and will be submitted for endorsement in June. To break the ceiling of official statistics they are considering further opening the UNECE Expert Forum for Producers and Users of Climate Change-related Statistics to actual users, which the organisers still struggle to engage with.

The meeting ended with very powerful remarks about the pink (or in this case, more fittingly) «green» bubble in which official statistics are sometimes put in when it comes to environmental and climate-change information. This bubble is easily burst when communicating with users (and disseminators of information, like journalists), since **it becomes clear that society keeps neglecting (or is, rather, unaware of) the wealth of available information within official statistics**.

Even communication officials from UN climate/environmental agencies are, in a way, neglecting the usefulness of official statistics when advocating for change. Their findings regarding climate change communication are very much in line with the takeaways from UNECE's Task Force (need to communicate in an understandable way, highlighting tangible stories on the impact of climate change, targeting messages, using trusted voices, etc.) and still, they are missing the fact that - as shown by the interviews – **(a) stories need data and (b) official statistics providers are one of the "voices people already trust"**.

Again, participants were left with plenty of «food for thought», in a conversation to surely be resumed in future gatherings. The scheduled for upcoming fortnights will be shared by the Chairs in due course, following the prioritisation of topics, which resulted from the informal "Christmas Fortnight".

Credentials to the UNECE Knowledge Hub on SDGs > Communication page:

Links

[please insert your link for a noteworthy national practice]

Draft Guidance on the Role of National Statistical Offices in achieving national climate objectives

How to reach the public with climate change-related statistics? Lessons learned from interviews with journalists in the UNECE region - presentation at the UNECE Expert Meeting on Dissemination and Communication of Statistics 2023

SDG - report 2022 (stat.gov.pl) – Statistics Poland SDG digital report, which in 2022 focused on the environmental dimension.

https://www.pulitzer.org/winners/mona-chalabi-contributor-new-york-times - Mona Chalabi, NY Times contributor, awarded with a Pulitzer Prize for her data visualisation depictions of wealth.

https://lnu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1743184/FULLTEXT03.pdf - South African study on climate change media coverage by Dr. Enoch Sithole (Fojo Media Institute at Linnaeus University, 2023)

Link to the TTCOM Christmas playlist -
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5SVYtbRZZLvwwmQjyv5CzF?si=63e0c7773b0c4fbd