

# FIGHTING MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

## What Role for Development Communicators?



Discussion Note  
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OECD Development Communication Network  
(DevCom)

## Introduction

Policy makers who want to help the world achieve the Sustainable Development Goals face a growing challenge: the spread of misinformation and disinformation. While “fake news” is nothing new, the digital means that help news spread are new. Development policy makers and communicators need to understand the phenomenon of mis- and disinformation, how it affects the work of their organisations, and what they can do to mitigate its impact.

This Discussion Note provides a brief introduction to mis- and disinformation and explains why it matters for sustainable development and international development co-operation. It outlines what policymakers are doing to address mis- and disinformation, and considers how development organisations – and their communications experts – can help. The Note will inform discussions at a workshop organised by the OECD Development Communication Network (DevCom) in July 2022.

The DevCom Zooms In Event on Fighting Mis- and Disinformation brought around the same table leaders of the OECD’s work on the fight against mis- and disinformation and its impact on governance; Fact-checking organisations doing crucial work in Africa and Latin America; Leading experts on Countering Influence Operations, Alicia Wanless, and on digital information ecosystems, Jonathan Tanner, author of 10 things to know about misinformation and disinformation.

The Discussion Note was prepared by the Secretariat of DevCom, which brings together communications, media relations and social media experts working in the field of international development co-operation. It builds on recent work and discussions led by the OECD Public Governance Directorate and the OECD DAC Network on Governance (GovNet).

### *What is misinformation and disinformation?*

**Misinformation** occurs when false, inaccurate or misleading information is shared *without* the intention of deceiving the public. **Disinformation** occurs when such information is *deliberately* created and shared to deceive the public ([OECD](#)).

Mis- and disinformation is not a new phenomenon – it is as old as propaganda, rumours and gossip. What is new is the digital means through which it spreads. Through social media, false information can spread more quickly than ever before, across borders and language barriers. Social media rewards novelty and surprise, providing incentives for people to share mis- and disinformation quickly. [MIT research](#) finds that it takes true stories 6 times longer to reach 1,500 people on Twitter than false ones.

Mis- and disinformation is dangerous because it blurs the lines between fact and fiction, and between facts and opinions. In a fragmented and overwhelming digital news landscape, citizens no longer know which information they can trust. [The Edelman Trust Barometer](#) finds that trust in traditional media has declined from 65% to 53% since 2019, while trust in social media has fallen from 43% to 35%. Just 5 minutes of exposure to mis- and disinformation can influence someone’s behaviours ([Zach Bastick, 2021](#)). The [OECD PISA Survey](#) finds that, on average, only half of all 15-year-old students in OECD countries can distinguish facts from opinions.



## *Why does misinformation and disinformation matter for sustainable development?*

Policy makers worldwide have many reasons to be concerned about the spread of mis- and disinformation: fake news prevents them from tackling global development challenges.

The Covid pandemic is a perfect case in point. When the pandemic started, 361 million videos related to the pandemic were uploaded on YouTube in just a month and around 550 million tweets mentioned Covid-19 ([WHO](#)). This "infodemic" prevented citizens from learning the facts about the virus and ways to contain its spread. Conspiracy theories have blossomed, and mis- and disinformation stoked scepticism among many citizens about sanitary measures to combat the pandemic.

Mis- and disinformation is also preventing policy makers from tackling the climate crisis. For example, in the United States, the share of people who accept that climate change is happening has remained at around 70% between 2016 and 2020 ([Annual Review](#)), meaning that 20% is inclined to deny the possibility and effects of climate change. In Europe, climate change denial reaches 6% in France, 9% in Great Britain and 11% in Germany ([Development Compass](#)). Policy makers will struggle to convince citizens to adopt climate-friendly behaviours like reducing meat consumption or using public transport.

Yet, the problem with mis- and disinformation is not just that it discourages citizens from adopting sustainable behaviours like getting vaccinated or reducing their carbon emissions. The bigger problem is that mis- and disinformation undermines trust in public institutions. If people do not believe that policy makers are acting in their best interests, they will refuse to pay taxes or comply with regulations ([UN](#) and [EU](#)). They will also refuse to give policy makers the support and legitimacy they need to implement policy reforms that promote economic and social progress.

Worse still, citizens will lose faith in democracy. More than half of people believe that government leaders are trying to mislead the population by saying things they know are false or gross exaggerations ([Edelman Trust Barometer](#)). Disinformation has helped influence election results in several countries ([UNESCO](#)), for example by discouraging some people from voting. Online disinformation has helped polarise societies, inciting violence, unrest and extremism, and has disrupted [democratic processes](#) ([EU](#), [UN](#) and [OECD](#)).

## *What does mis- and disinformation mean for organisations working in development co-operation?*

If mis- and disinformation is a concern for policy makers pursuing sustainable development, then it should also be a concern for their international partners. There are many reasons why mis- and disinformation represents a specific challenge for organisations working in development co-operation.

## Challenge #1

### Development organisations often work in settings susceptible to mis- and disinformation

Mis- and disinformation is particularly problematic in countries with weaker institutions. Policy makers in these countries often work in environments where:

- Government transparency and information flows are already low;
- Public communication capacities are weak;
- Citizens have less access to information and/or lower levels of media literacy.

In these countries, public communicators often have fewer resources to help spot and tackle the spread of mis- and disinformation, reducing their organisations' capacity to deliver public services ([Africa Center for Strategic studies](#)).

The challenge becomes even greater when public communication is instrumentalised for political gain (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2021). Political actors – including government leaders – have used disinformation to undermine human rights, increase repression and reduce civic space.

In some cases, there are also powerful external sources of mis- and disinformation ([EU](#)). Disinformation campaigns orchestrated by foreign actors can influence national narratives, create divisions and encourage populism ([Fragile States Index 2020](#)).

## Challenge #2

### Developing countries can be a source of innovative solutions to this global issue

Countries where mis- and disinformation is prevalent have been innovative in tackling fake news and have solutions to share with the rest of the world. This includes fact-checking initiatives like [Africa Check](#), which operates in Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal and South Africa, and [LatamChequea](#), which brings together more than 30 organisations from 17 countries in Latin America, Spain and Portugal. Supported by UNESCO, the [Media Challenge Initiative](#) trains and mentors young journalists in Uganda to convey evidence-based stories that matter, highlight solutions and promote dialogue.

## Challenge #3

### Development organisations need trust in the countries where they operate

Alongside the policy makers they seek to support, development organisations themselves may be subject to mis- and disinformation in the countries where they work. Mis- and disinformation can undermine legitimacy and trust, depriving them of their "license to operate" in local communities. This is a particular challenge in geopolitical settings where communities have doubts about the motives of their external development partners. Development projects may be framed as instruments of post-colonialism or as vehicles to promote commercial interests. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Russia is widely accused of contributing to the spread of mis- and disinformation around the world ([Carl Miller; Tony Blair Institute for Global Change](#)). This may further stoke negative public opinion about development actors in the countries where they operate.

## Challenge #4

### Governments have committed to tackle mis- and disinformation as part of the SDGs

In 2015, global leaders de facto agreed to tackle mis- and disinformation when they adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This is not just because, as explained above, mis- and disinformation undermines policy results. It is also because there are specific SDG targets related to the information that governments need to convey to their citizens. For a start, achieving SDG target 16.10 requires citizens to have access to public information. SDG 12.8 stipulates that people everywhere should have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature. SDG 13.3 focuses on information to take action to combat climate change. In SDG 4.7, global leaders have committed to ensure that all learners are equipped with knowledge and skills to promote sustainable development, human rights, global citizenship among others.

## Challenge #5

### Development organisations need trust from the taxpayers that fund their work

As accountable institutions, development organisations always need to show that they spend their money wisely. With public budgets are under pressure – not least due to the Russia's war on Ukraine ([OECD 2022](#)) – the need to show that development achieves results may be even higher. Yet, development programmes have long suffered from misinformation. For example, aid is often regarded as ineffective due to corruption. 65% of French citizens think that donating to poor countries is pointless due to corruption ([Focus2030 2019](#)). There are also persistent doubts about the effectiveness of aid spending. Aid is perceived as effective or very effective by only 35% of people in Germany, 25% in France and 20% in Great Britain ([DEL Dashboard Germany January 2022](#)). More than half of EU citizens (59%) think that the EU is not driving a positive and sustainable change in tackling poverty ([Eurobarometer 2021](#)). The misperception about wasted development co-operation has persisted despite longstanding efforts by development community to get the true story across (see myth-busting efforts by [the UK government](#) and by [Bill and Melinda Gates](#)).

*What can public institutions do to address mis- and disinformation?*

Governments and international institutions have begun tackling the spread of mis- and disinformation, using diverse approaches. One common approach has been to **respond directly to specific instances** of mis- and disinformation. This requires government-led monitoring to identify instances of disinformation and create counter-narratives. The **European Union** has launched and supported several projects seeking to promote information accuracy on social media platforms.

For more information on EU projects tackling mis- and disinformation, check the Social Observatory for Disinformation and Social Media Analysis ([SOMA](#)) and other EU-funded projects ([PROVENANCE](#), [SocialTruth](#), [EUNOMIA](#), [WeVerify](#)) ([EU](#)).

Before the country's 2018 elections, the **Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency** conducted an assessment of the media landscape and provided public communicators with a fact sheet about influence operations and a handbook on crisis communication ([OECD 2020](#)).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, **Colombia's Ministry of Health** developed a strategy to share trustworthy scientific facts and encourage vaccination. The government adapted its [campaign](#) to the most vulnerable parts of the population and worked with influencers, [music festivals](#), opinion leaders and scientific to counter vaccine-related misinformation. It ran multi-channel campaigns, using [social media](#), television and radio, press releases and targeted emailing ([SDG Communicator](#)).

In addition to responding to specific instances of mis- and disinformation, governments are developing **longer-term approaches, building coalitions against mis- and disinformation with the media, civil society institutions and the general public**. This includes facilitating access to government information; conducting public consultations; supporting public-service broadcasters; and implementing media and digital literacy campaigns; and funding research. Italy has encouraged public officials to use social media for dialogue with citizens, disseminating e-books with advice on how to increase transparency in public communication ([OECD 2020](#)).

Increasingly, governments are also turning to **regulations to help address mis- and disinformation**, particularly when they perceive that the digital marketplace cannot address the problem alone. Governments can compel platforms to share information about their algorithms and compel stronger moderation of harmful content, hate speech and fake news. For instance, in 2019, the EU established the European Union's Code of Practice Against Disinformation for technology platforms and industries such as Facebook, Google, Twitter, Mozilla.

### *What are development co-operation partners doing to fight mis- and disinformation?*

Members of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) have only just begun to **address mis- and disinformation as part of their development programmes**. One related area of funding that can be found in the [Creditor Reporting System](#) is "Media and the Free Flow of Information". In 2020, DAC members allocated more than USD 600 million in ODA to this area, funding projects to develop innovative content, to increase media capacity and support resilient, independent and free media in fragile settings.

However, this represents only around 0.2% of total ODA, and it is not clear how much of it specifically helps address mis- and disinformation. Only a small number of projects specifically refer to mis- and disinformation. They include Czech projects on "Media Independence in Times of Disinformation" (in Albania) and "Citizens informed about the EU" (in Serbia), Finnish support for an "Independent Journalism Center/Media literacy innovative tools for media savvy citizens" (in Moldova) and Canadian projects in Iraq, Tunisia, Mauritania, Uganda and other countries on "Mobilizing the Media to fight the Coronavirus (COVID-19)".

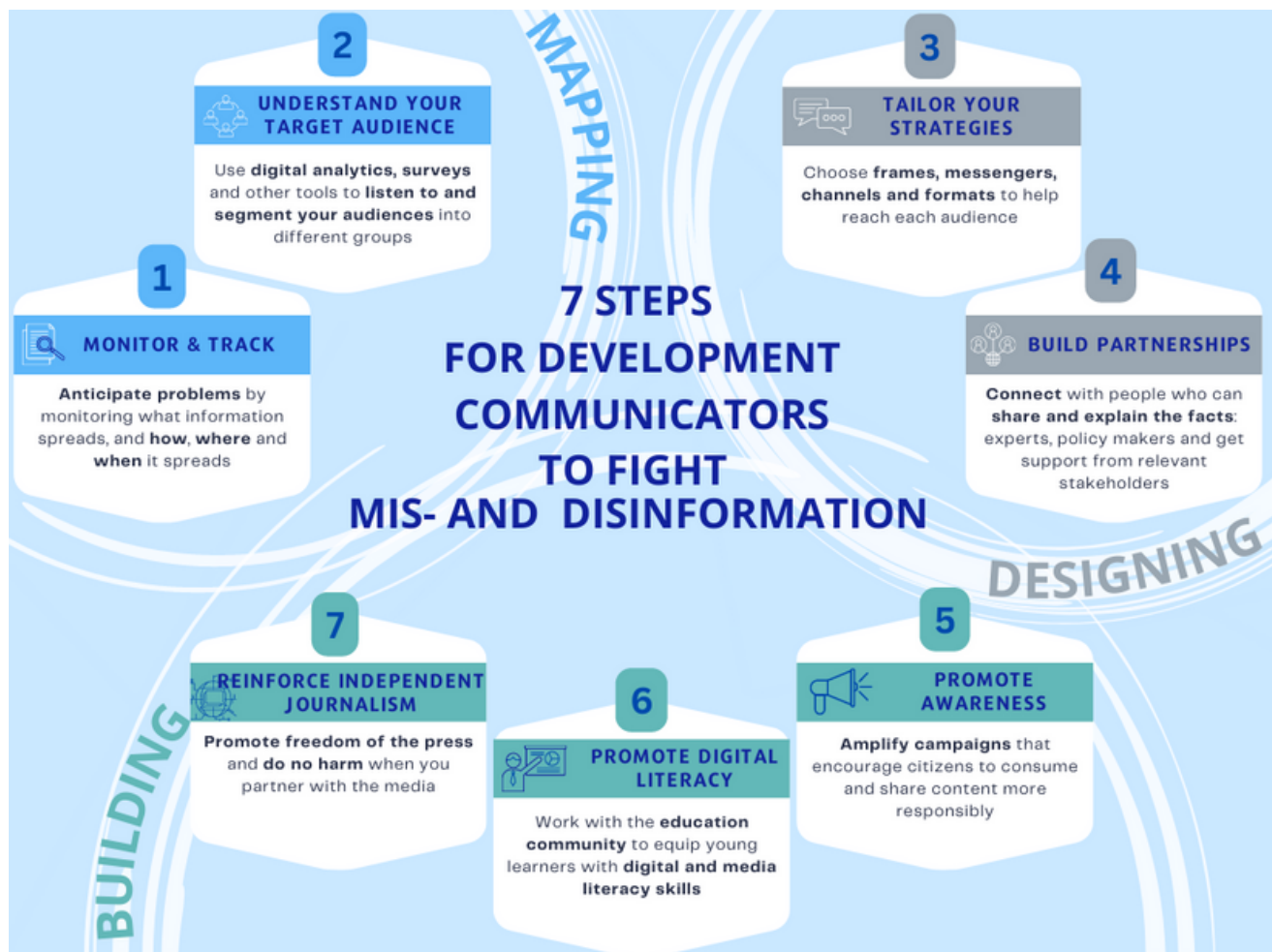
## How can development communicators help fight mis- and disinformation?

Many of the efforts and approaches outlined above lie in the hands of policy makers and regulators. Yet, **development communicators have crucial skills, knowledge and relationships** to contribute to the fight against mis- and disinformation. They have deep and up-to-date insights into public debates and media coverage about development issues. They manage relations with journalists and understand how citizens consume news. They are thus well placed to help their organisations:

**A. Mapping and understanding** the spread of mis- and disinformation

**B. Designing communication strategies** that keep citizens inform and debunk myths

**C. Building environments** where mis- and disinformation cannot spread



Here is a list of **7 ideas** for development communicators seeking to act in each of these three areas.

## A. Mapping the spread of mis- and disinformation

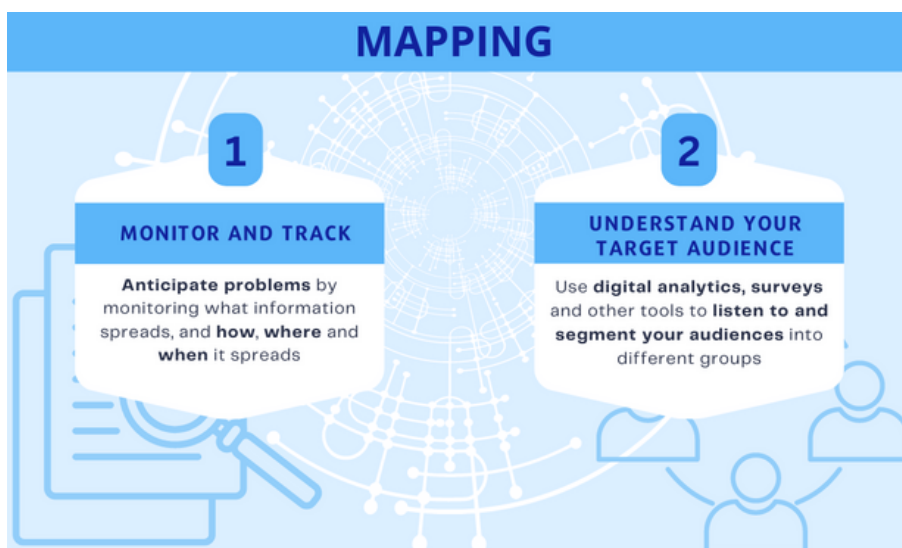
### IDEA 1: MONITOR AND TRACK MIS- AND DISINFORMATION

Development communicators need to track public and media debates about the work of their organisations. Today, this includes being closely attuned to the spread of mis- and disinformation on development and development co-operation, and about the specific work of their organisations. The more time fake news has to spread, the more difficult it is to stop. In other words, it is easier to pre-bunk a myth than to de-bunk it. Development communicators should monitor not just **what kind** of information spreads, but also **where** it spreads (i.e. on which platforms and in which geographical regions?), **when** it spreads most (e.g. around policy announcements?), and what **impact** the information is having on public opinion. There are many new tools to help monitor mis- and disinformation, including online fact-checking online platforms, open-source intelligence research and social media analysis ([Disinfo](#)).

### IDEA 2: UNDERSTAND YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE

To get the facts across, development communicators need to first understand, segment and prioritise among their [audiences](#). They need to know how susceptible different audiences might be to different kinds of mis- and disinformation. Using **surveys**, **consultations**, focus groups or digital analytics, they can distinguish between audiences based on their socio-economic backgrounds, media habits, or degree of knowledge and engagement in development

(OECD DevCom). Understanding audiences also requires active listening and open dialogue: policy makers need to build trust with citizens.



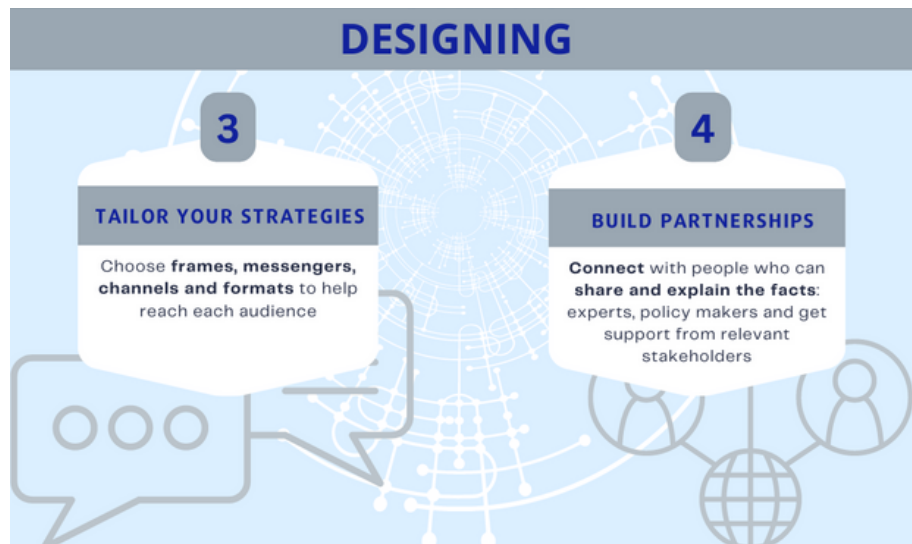
## B. Designing strategies to inform citizens and debunk myths

### IDEA 3: TAILOR YOUR STRATEGIES

Development communicators need to tailor their messages to specific target audiences. This requires smart choices on framing, messengers and influencers, channels and content formats (DevCom Toolkit). It means striking a balance between data and emotive content between formal and informal language, between in-house messengers (like government leaders) and external influencers (like youtubers), and between traditional and digital media. The Development Engagement Lab finds, for instance, that the most effective messengers on development combine “warmth” and “competence” ([Development Engagement Lab](#)).

### IDEA 4: BUILD PARTNERSHIPS

Development communicators cannot tackle mis- and disinformation on their own. For a start, they need to build effective relationships with people who can share and explain the facts: scientific experts or policy makers, for example. Understanding the flow of mis- and disinformation also means engaging with intelligence analysts and experts on algorithms. Communicators also need to partner with traditional and social media platforms to develop joint tools to tackle the spread of mis- and disinformation.



## C. Building environments where mis- and disinformation cannot spread easily

### IDEA 5: PROMOTE AWARENESS AND MORE RESPONSIBLE ONLINE BEHAVIOURS

Communicators need to engage citizens in the fight against mis- and disinformation, encouraging them to consume and share content more responsibly. This means alerting people about potential specific instances of mis- and disinformation. More importantly, however, it means equipping them with the skills to verify and question the accuracy and sources of information they receive. Here is a list of awareness-raising campaigns and fact-checking initiatives that communicators can help amplify: [Verified](#), [#ThinkBeforeSharing](#), [Pause](#), [#TakeCareBeforeYoushare](#).

### IDEA 6: LINK WITH EDUCATORS TO PROMOTE DIGITAL AND MEDIA LITERACY

Younger generations may be "digital natives" but are also highly susceptible to being manipulated by mis- and disinformation. Communicators can work with the global education community to equip young learners with digital and media literacy skills ([UN](#), [UNESCO](#)). School curricula need to include modules on digital and media literacy, and both teachers and students need training and guidance materials to help them respond to mis- and disinformation on global issues.

### IDEA 7: REINFORCE INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM

Journalists are in the information front line and require support in producing independent and factual content ([UNESCO](#)). Support to independent journalism has been a long-standing component of ODA, but the support only comes from a handful of DAC members. The Center for International Media Assistance finds that this support is fragmented into small and relatively short-term interventions, rather than forming part of a longer-term strategic vision ([CIMA](#)). With media viability under threat in many low- and middle-income countries ([Economist Impact](#)), development organisations need to increase and adapt their support for healthy information eco-systems.

Development communicators manage their organisations' relationships with the media and are thus well placed to support this process.

