

WELCOME TO PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS CLASS

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FACILITATOR

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Communicating public policy

Scenario: “The First COVID-19 Case in Uganda”

- ❖ Late one evening, the Ministry of Health confirmed the first COVID-19 case in Uganda – a traveller who came in through Entebbe Airport. Hours later, “hundreds got infected” and “the government first temporarily covered up”. Rumours went viral on WhatsApp and other social media fora such as Twitter. Journalists started demanding the Ministry for confirmation and the public got into panic, rushing to pharmacies to buy masks and sanitizers.
- ❖ ***Assuming you are a senior member of the policy communication taskforce in the Ministry of health.*** The Minister turned to you and asked:
 - Do we release a statement tonight, or wait for more complete information from the laboratory and verification from WHO, which could take up to 10 days?”

Key points

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- (i) What would be your response? What information should be released in the first 24 hours, first week, and coming months? Justify what informs your responses.
- (i) How do you get messages that are both accurate and timely enough to avoid public panic?
- (i) What channels and messengers are needed to reach the urban and rural population effectively?
- (i) What impact would late or badly framed communication have on trust and policy compliance?

Scenario two

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“Silent Emergence of Cancer Cases near Factories”

- ❖ Five years after residents and workers living around Jinja and Namanve industrial areas started reporting increasing cases of cancer. Local leaders and communities have been calling for investigations, linking the illness to emissions from the factories. Environmental activists are calling for government action while industries' leaders maintain they operate in compliance with standards.
- ❖ The Ministry of Health and the National Environmental Management Authority (NEMA) have formed a research team that should investigate the risk and establish facts. Their scientific work will involve environmental sampling, health surveillance, and epidemiological studies to enable them draw a conclusion after gathering all data. In the meantime, the public and Members of Parliament are demanding to know the truth.

Discussion questions

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- ❖ You are part of the policy communication team tasked on how to inform stakeholders about the issue.
 - (i) What do you communicate and how, when waiting for the research to be done knowing that the conclusion may be inconclusive?
 - (ii) How to keep policymakers informed without sensationalising the matter or politicising it?
 - (iii) What should be the tone, timeliness and format of updates on the issue to various stakeholders (media, community, Parliament, industries)?
 - (iv) Ways to strike a balance between scientific accuracy, transparency and public trust when the data for all parties to act on are yet to be known years later.
 - (v) In what ways do long-term policy communications differ from crisis communication in terms of urgency, evidence, and messaging?

Key issues to consider

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- ❖ Smith (2015) offers a general Method of Communicating;

Step 1: Prepare

- ✓ To what policy do I refer?
- ✓ Which audiences are relevant?
- ✓ What is the political context and the major points of agreement/disagreement?
- ✓ How do I frame the problem, and which stories are relevant to my audience?

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Step 2: Plan

- ✓ What is this communication's purpose?
- ✓ What is my story and message/ content ? Define the key messages
- ✓ What is my role and interest?
- ✓ For whom does this communication speak?
- ✓ Who is my audience? (Hajdu & Simoneau, 2020)
- ✓ What will they learn?
- ✓ Choose the appropriate channels (Barreto et al., 2024; Hajdu & Simoneau, 2020).
- ✓ What is the context and timeframe?
- ✓ What should be the form, content, and tone of the communication?
- ✓ Ensure the message is clear, accessible, and communicated with care (e.g., infographics, storytelling) to increase understanding (Hajdu & Simoneau, 2020)

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Step 3. Produce

- ✓ Make a full draft, seek comments during a review, then revise.

“checklists” to assess such communications:

1. **Effectiveness.** Speak with an audience in mind, highlight a well-defined problem and purpose, project authority, and use the right form of communication.
2. **Excellence.** Focus on clarity, precision, conciseness, and credibility.

Public Policy communication process

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- ❖ Is a multifaceted process and a one-way approaches to continuous exchanges and response cycle among stakeholders (Barreto et al., 2024).
- ❖ Policy policy dialogues can suffer from problems with the late distribution of documents, and insufficient skills of participants, which hinders communication (Nabyonga-Oreme et al., 2016).
- ❖ In short: the communication process is a part of the policy cycle

Rationale for policy communication

- ✓ Legitimisation of the decision
- ✓ Greater transparency
- ✓ Stakeholder understanding and buy-in,
- ✓ Supporting its effective implementation (O'Malley et al., 2009).
- ✓ Systemic strategy to retain public confidence (WHO, 2024).

Benefits of policy communication

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- ✓ Greater stakeholder understanding
 - ✓ Public support or acceptance
 - ✓ Less misunderstanding or resistance
 - ✓ Alignment of implementation actors
 - ✓ Reinforced accountability and transparency (Reynolds et al., 2020).
- ❖ On the cautionary side: benefits are highly contingent on context, message design, audience characteristics, and follow-through on implementation.

Expected outcomes of policy communication

- ❖ Expected outcomes can be divided into short-term, medium-term and long-term outcomes.

Short-term outcomes

- ✓ Increased awareness of the policy amongst target audiences and compliance,
- ✓ Improved understanding of policy intent
- ✓ Stakeholder clarity of roles and responsibilities (Langley et al., 2020).

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Medium-term outcomes

- ✓ Changes in attitudes or behaviours among implementers or the public e.g. compliance, cooperation (Langley et al., 2020).

Long-term outcomes

- ✓ Policy implementation success
 - ✓ Achievement of policy goals,
 - ✓ Improved system functioning
 - ✓ Enhanced legitimacy/trust in governance
 - ✓ Public understanding
 - ✓ Participation and policy acceptance (Kondolele et al., 2025).
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- ❖ Policy outcomes (i.e., unemployment levels, life-expectancy of population) or indices of policy system change (i.e., administrative re-organization, privatization) (Su et al., 2024; Seva & Jagers, 2013).
 - ❖ However, communication failure can derail policy implementation (Howes et al., 2017).

Communicating with/to

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- ❖ Good communications start with being clear who you are talking to and why: tailoring the content, the channel, time and format for the audience improves understanding and uptake and reduces wasted effort (Hawkins et al., 2008).
- ❖ Hawkins et al. (2008) define tailoring as: “any of a number of methods for creating communication that are individualized for their recipients with the expectation that this individualization will bring about larger intended effects of these communications”.
- ❖ Giordano et al. (2008) specifically recommend that information should be “accessible, relevant, comprehensible, comprehensive, client-centered, and phase-specific”.
- ❖ The communication should be audience-specific, accessible, actionable, credible, relevant, timely and understandable and fit for purpose (WHO, 2024).

Communicating with beneficiaries

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- ❖ The rationale for this is typically grounded in a combination of;
 - ✓ Accountability,
 - ✓ Protection
 - ✓ Participation
 - ✓ Service improvement principles
- ❖ They have a right to know what to expect, how to access services, and how to give feedback or complaints (Asgary & Waldman, 2017)
- ❖ It is not just about transmitting information but also “listening, exploring, understanding, involving and empowering them (Mefalopulos et al., 2008).
- ❖ Effective community engagement communications depend on: community participation, acceptability of the messages, credibility of communication sources, and a community that values a program (Dada et al., 2023).

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- ❖ Sharma and Turki. (2025) makes a similar point around a shift from one-way communication to dialogue-based two-way communication.
- ❖ Good Beneficiary Communication
 - ✓ Builds trust
 - ✓ Prevents misinformation
 - ✓ Increases the appropriate uptake of services
 - ✓ Strengthens programme design through Beneficiary inputs.

Communication to the public

- ✓ Fulfils the functions of legitimacy (Lee & Ko, 2020).
- ✓ Transparency
- ✓ Behaviour change
- ✓ Promotes democratic accountability, especially in times of complex societal challenges such as COVID-19.
- ✓ It helps to communicate policy intent, evidence and impacts so citizens can hold institutions accountable and follow recommended behaviour (Reynolds et al., 2020).

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❖ Benefits include

- ✓ Public acceptance and uptake
- ✓ Reduced rumours and resistance
- ✓ Increased civic compliance
- ✓ Expected outcomes and awareness
- ✓ Enhances understanding, and attitude change
- ✓ results into behavioural change (Kondolele et al., 2025; Reynolds et al., 2020).

Communication with policy/decision-makers

- ✓ The rationale is to influence policy and use.
- ✓ Communications should translate evidence into concise and actionable messages.
- ✓ Should be adapted to policy timescales and decision windows (Nagyova & Michie, 2023; McCrabb et al., 2023).

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- ❖ The benefits of effective communications can include;
- ✓ Faster and more evidence-informed decisions
- ✓ Clearer mandates for implementation
- ✓ Improved relationships between researchers and policy actors
- ✓ Good briefing about the desired outcomes.
- ✓ Adaption of recommended policy options and documents (Arnautu & Dagenais (2021)).

Communicating with stakeholders

- ❖ Engaging stakeholders (local partners e.g. communities, NGOs, national actors e.g. ministries, parliament, media; international partners e.g. donors, UN agencies, multilateral banks) is based on coordination rationale, legitimacy and resource mobilisation (Oliver et al. 2018; Patil, 2025).
- ❖ Effective engagement clarifies roles and aligns objectives with research findings (Patil, 2025; Oliver et al. 2018).
- ❖ Strategic communication frameworks build trust, improve transparency and promote shared ownership (Ishola et al., 2024).

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- ❖ Benefits include
 - ✓ Reduced duplication
 - ✓ Shared ownership
 - ✓ Enhanced funding/support opportunities
 - ✓ Coordinated plans, and smoother implementation
 - ✓ Stakeholder commitments
 - ✓ Joint monitoring arrangements
 - ✓ Documented inputs shaping policy or project decisions (Akhmouch & Clavreul, 2016).
- ❖ However, challenges include potential tokenism and power dynamics that can limit genuine participation.

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NB: In all audiences, three points that cut across to improve results:

- ✓ Using audience analysis to tailor messages and channels.
- ✓ Designing two-way feedback mechanisms to capture comprehension and course correction.
- ✓ Setting measurable objectives to create awareness, comprehension, attitude, behaviour, policy uptake to evaluate communication effectiveness, challenging the common one size fits all approach (Crosier et al., 2015).
- ❖ In this setting it is critical to begin by identifying objectives and define audiences (Hajdu et al., 2020) and giving timely, and credible communication to increase awareness and trust (Barreto et al., 2024).

Channels and tools of policy communication

- ❖ Are practical avenues and instruments through which information on policies are transmitted or distributed with the assistance of social media and other information communication technology to be understood and acted upon policy information (Canary & Taylor, 2020).
- ❖ **Policy communication Channels include;**
 - ✓ Interpersonal,
 - ✓ Prints such as news papers
 - ✓ Broadcast
 - ✓ Digital platforms social media,
 - ✓ Participatory means,
 - ✓ Traditional mass media eg Radios, TVs , scholarly writing, and policy papers (Plohl et al., 2018).
- ❖ **While tools include**
 - ✓ Policy briefs
 - ✓ Policy issues and Reports
 - ✓ Press releases
 - ✓ Infographics,
 - ✓ Social media content.
 - ✓ NB: The choice of Channels and Tools often depends on the nature of the policy, target audience, and communication objectives.

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THANK YOU FOR LISTENING TO ME