



Appendix 1.

Lessons learnt: Reflections on the performance of Ukraine Public Dialogue

Communication – a new field for Sida

Sida and other donors have a long experience of working with independent media and civil society organizations, but working with public information officers is an almost entirely new field. Sida has probably never before financed a project of this kind. The experience among Sida and embassy staff is also very limited when it comes to communication issues.

Therefore, we see it as important to pinpoint the experiences of this pilot project as a reference for future, similar programmes or projects.

Communication theory and the need for new Ukrainian words

In many assignments we have noticed a lack of knowledge in the field of communication theory. For many organisations, communication has been synonymous with the spreading of a message, and only a few have understood the idea of communication as a tool for dialogue and change.

In Ukraine, there is a profound academic tradition in the area of communication as philosophy, semantics and semiotics. There is however very little written or known in the field of strategic communication, or communication as a management tool.

In the cooperation with our Ukraine counterparts we encountered that their knowledge base varied substantially. During study visits questions showed that the participants were well oriented in some areas, for example political communication, while they lacked even basic knowledge in other fields. One example of the latter is the issue of internal communication. Internal magazines, that are extremely common in Sweden, were a totally new area for several of our Ukraine participants.

We also found out that the Ukraine language lacked many of the key words needed in order to describe modern communication processes. This, in turn, made our work challenging as we really could see that we brought new knowledge, but also sometimes complicated and frustrating.

Ukraine Public Dialogue – a demand-driven process

Ukraine Public Dialogue (UPD) started as a demand-driven process. Natalia Dniprenko, Head of Department for Communication with the



Public and State Authorities at the Cabinet of Ministers (here after DoC-SCMU).

and her staff expressed a clear need to learn more about strategic communication processes. This was definitely an asset for the project as the ownership was clearly defined, and that the project aimed at satisfying demands express by the DoC-SCMU.

The downside was that the project became too focused on satisfying the needs of a few persons, delivering input that was sometimes more to the use for one person than for the organisation as a whole. This being said it is no question that Natalia Dniprenko and her staff are extremely dedicated to their task. The political situation (more on this below) required very long working days and the UPD project – that aimed at a elaborating a more long-term strategy – was put on top of this heavy workload.

During the process we had several discussions on how to balance this. One way to broaden the target group was to organize separate seminars at different government agencies (ministries, the office of the presidency etc.) as well as including persons from other ministries and the presidency in study visits. In retrospect, it might had been better to balance the DoC-SCMU by working more closely with other actors. This would in turn have required a more extensive project along the initial project plans.

Another sensitive balance is the one between normative work and executive, hands-on communication. As the SCMU is the normative body for all executive government bodies, it was indeed a strength of the project to be placed here. On the other hand, when norms, study material and strategies have been elaborated, there is an evident risk that they are not carried out – especially considering the constant political turmoil.

Our conclusion is therefore that the optimal solution is a mix of normative and executive government bodies, ideally with the possibility of tying the norms elaborated into executive communication work related to a specific reform, involving a number of different executive bodies.

A period of political turbulence

The period during which the activities took place was one of extreme political turbulence. Two parliamentary elections were held and the government changed twice. There were even long periods (especially Autumn 2007) with no government at all! The fact that DoC-SCMU could function during such a period is in itself positive as it shows that Ukraine has a relatively high level of professionalism among civil servants. If the same thing had happened in a country like Honduras, or the USA, the key



project staff would have been replaced several times and it would be difficult to generate sustainable results – at least on a shorter or mid-term range.

Political and cultural obstacles for change

This is not to say that the political culture did not pose a problem. Despite the fact that more than fifteen years have passed since Ukraine became independent, Soviet traditions remain strong and still shape the society.

In government communication, there is a clash between the old one-way propaganda information and new techniques built on dialogue, feedback and openness. This is on one hand the best argument to set up a project of this kind as the knowledge of democratic government communication techniques and methods is almost non-existent, even among high-ranking communication officials.

The lack of knowledge of, and adaptation to, modern communication theory among Ukraine government communicators create obstacles that sometimes can be difficult to surmount. For instance, modern internal communication is largely based on networks, such as an Intranet. However, the introducing of a common Intranet to improve communication between the different executive bodies will be met with resistance in a strictly hierarchical environment. Introduction of modern government communication thus requires both a change of the mind-set among communication officials as well as new structures for information sharing.

Another clash concerns clarity. The Ukraine administration is still permeated with a heavy, theoretical academic jargon. A communication officer that tries to introduce a message in a simple, clear way that can be understood by ordinary citizens is usually not regarded with positive eyes from her superiors.

In other words, while there is growing consciousness among communication officials of a need for simpler, clearer language, the use of such language is not regarded as an incentive for promotion internally – rather the opposite!

The Academy of Public Administration is normative in this matter, and there is an urgent need to establish new norms regarding how the language should be used to reach ordinary citizens.

The square administrative and political heritage from the Soviet days does not even acknowledge a PR-officer as a profession! What is a profession and not is carefully regulated in the law, and as there is no such



acknowledged profession as a PR-officer, this reflects on curriculums at universities, on salaries and career possibilities.

Coordination with other donors/actors

During the initial phase we spent much time meeting and trying to coordinate with other donors such as OSCE, USAID and the EC. However, all these efforts gave little result and no joint activities could be developed.

It might be that the Paris agenda not yet has permeated the donor community in Ukraine. Another assumption might be that communication processes are difficult and that many projects that look good on paper produce very little tangible results. In the long run, however, we are convinced that communication activities should include dialogue, coordination and contacts with other international actors.

Changes in the media landscape

When we started, the Internet was a minor phenomenon in Ukraine. Since then, internet use has developed rapidly and today more than half of the habitants of Kyiv use the Internet at least once a week. By comparison, in 2001, there were only 150 000 subscriptions to the Internet.

The rapid evolvement of digital media is now spreading to other big cities with tremendous speed. Today, practically all newspapers, radio- and TV-stations and larger NGOs have Internet.

This has enormous consequences for government communication. It is suddenly possible to reach a great number of citizens and stakeholder at a very low cost. One immediate effect is that thousands of communal newspapers are closed down and replaced by websites, with a massive loss of jobs for journalists as one result. Another result is that many elderly people and others that don't manage the Internet loose their only official channel from the authorities.

Looking at the positive long-term consequences, the young generation, that masters the digital technology, has a great advantage in this development. This may be an asset for the development of a more efficient and democratic government communication. Many times, this generation is well acquainted with trends in democratic market economies in the west and possesses an impressive knowledge of IT.

Dialogue with Sida and the Swedish Embassy

Especially the Swedish Embassy in Kyiv provided invaluable help in understanding the Ukraine culture, especially in moments of frustration when we where not able to advance the project due to differences and lack



of understanding between us and our Ukraine counterparts. Without this support it would not have been possible to complete the project.

Sometimes, however, we found Sida to be a bit too cautious. One of the central ideas with UPD was to connect with a wide group of stakeholders and through this network create a debate and discussion in order to stimulate the use of democratic government communication. As a result of this we received project proposals from the office of the President and other ministries and authorities.

Supporting democratic government communication often gives the opportunity to work at a high political level and to integrate the efforts with a general Swedish strategy in line with the PGD.

Compared to many other projects, UPD reached high up in the political spheres where we had daily direct contacts with vice ministers and persons close to the President. We felt that this sometimes made Sida staff a bit uncomfortable, perhaps for the risk of being regarded as biased in a hot political climate.

Initially, we shared this fear. However, as the project progressed we rather experiences that the project achieved respect by communication officers, political movements and journalists from all political groupings.

The reason for this was probably that we were crystal clear in communicating that the project aimed at improving democratic government communication of all stakeholders, no matter their affiliation. The clear focus on officials – avoiding connections with politicians – as well as the ambition to create open platforms for dialogue for government communicators and journalists are important factors in establishing this credibility.

Achievements (non-tangible)

Besides achieving a number of tangible results – such as the handbook for government communication, a vast study material in different fields of executive communication, study visits, seminars and workshops etc – we have created a network consisting of several young communication specialists from different government bodies. They have started to set up their own informal meetings and maintain contacts by themselves. The creation of this network as well as other informal groupings might even create the strongest long-term impact!

Lessons learned by Sida

In our opinion, Sida should more firmly stress communication as part of a public sector reform programmes. Still, the great majority of Sida staff does



not regard communication as an integrated tool in development processes, but sees it rather as an ad-hoc activity to spread information.

In order to improve the understanding of the role of communication in development cooperation, Sida should organize in-house training on strategic communication for key-staff at different departments. This could be done through seminars and workshops.

Lessons learned by Global Reporting

We initially started out with a three-year prospect, and did not manage to reduce the scope as much as we should. In many ways we tried to do three years of activities in just one year, and it did not fully work.

Ukraine is a huge country and we would have needed to spend more time getting acquainted with different actors, spending more time travelling to other regions of the country. Now, too much time was spent on meetings in Kyiv that sometimes gave little result.

That fact that none of us in the project team spoke Ukraine or Russian was also a limiting factor. A better understanding the Ukraine culture, for example the role of the academic world, would have helped us to reach some of our goals in a more smooth way.

Lessons learned by our Ukraine counterparts

At the reception after the final seminar several participants regretted that the project had come to an end: “Why do you stop now when things finally have started to happen!” they exclaimed.

In saying this, they had taken a realistic approach to what is possible to achieve during such a short period, as well as an understanding how the process could be developed from this point of departure. Building up a well-functioning government communication structure is a process that will need around five to ten years, given the present conditions in Ukraine.

According to Natalia Dniprenko, strategic communication will now be the basis for Ukraine government communication. This is well in line with the handbook and the study material produced in the project. However, if this is to be realized is still to be seen.

Another lesson learnt is that Ukraine is not so “uncivilized” or “behind” as many Ukrainian counterparts claim the country to be. Despite the political heritage, Ukraine government communication is quite sophisticated compared to neighbouring countries. The project has hopefully given more confidence to government communicators, both by making them realize this fact and by providing more knowledge.



Is a regional scale up possible?

We believe that the experiences made during the project could be valuable for future contributions in the field of government communication in Ukraine, in the region and in other countries with which Sweden is cooperating.

Sweden has a long tradition of democratic government communication and a widespread competence at ministries, government authorities and municipalities. During the course of UPD we have developed a network of Swedish and European government communicators, specialists and researchers.

The logic of democratic government communication is quite similar regardless of the cultural and political context. Especially in other CIS-countries, such as Belorussia, Moldova and Georgia, the conditions are similar. The UPD-network, developed in Ukraine and Latvia, also allows Sida to engage in tripartite programmes, or at least using the experiences from these countries when contributing to the development of democratic, effective government communication in other countries in the region.

The material that can be found on the project website www.ukrainepublicdialogue.org will most likely be very useful also for other countries in the region.