

Developing a Communication Strategy for a Local Government Association (LGA)



Colophon

This publication was made within the framework of the VNG Association Capacity Building programme 2003-2006.

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This publication forms part of a series of documents for Local Government Associations, all available from VNG International. This series was made possible by financial contributions from the Netherlands Ministry for Development Cooperation and the VNG, Association of Netherlands Municipalities.

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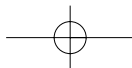
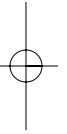
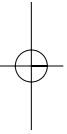
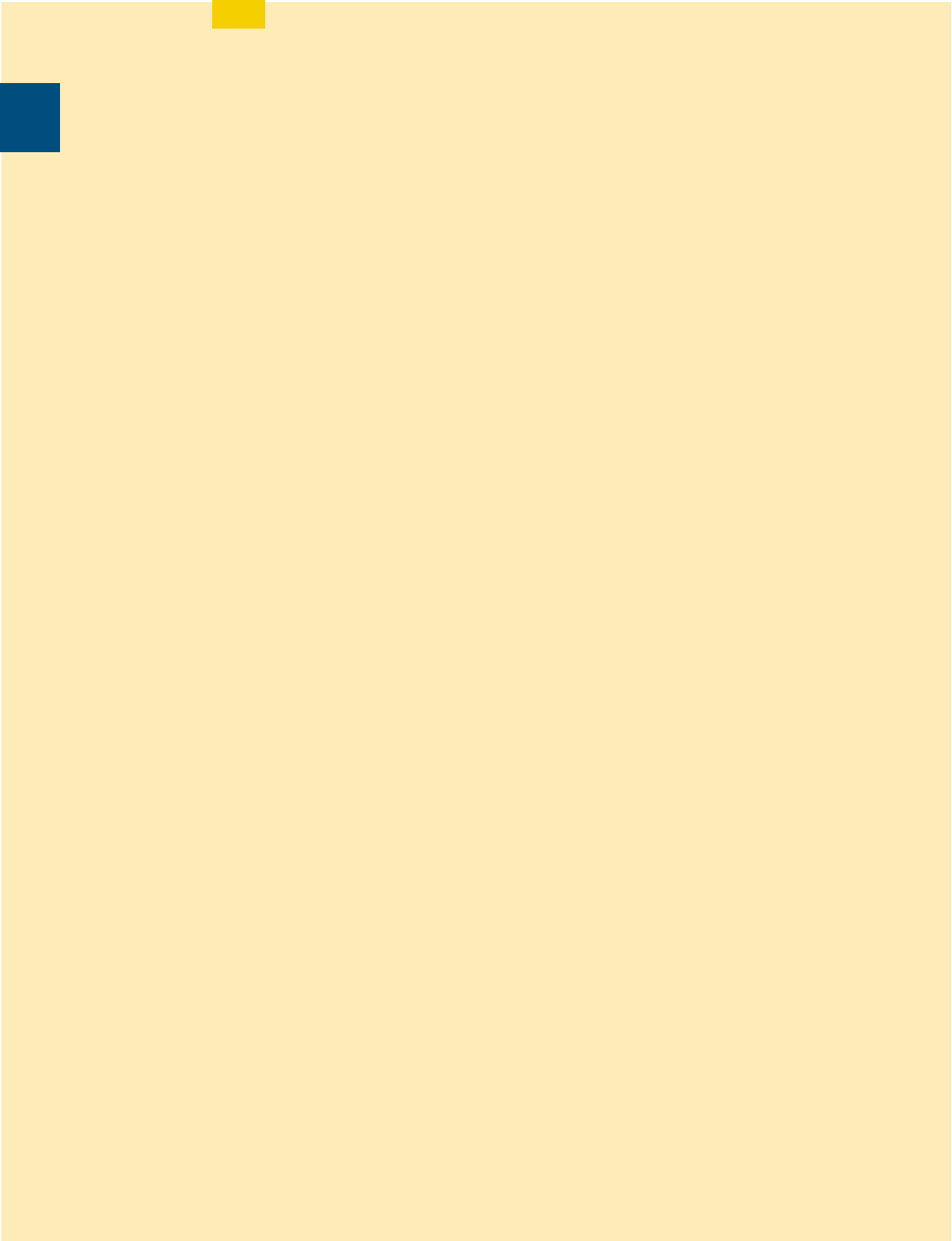
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Introduction

Communication is now recognized as a key element in the management of any institution, whether it is a multi-national corporation, a small non-governmental organization or a Local Government Association (LGA).

Efficient communication is more than a simple transfer of information: it must be bi-directional, open to exchanges and feedback. In order to *survive*, the organization must *inform* everyone it is in contact with. But if it wants to *grow*, the organization must also *listen* to all these people and adapt itself in reaction to what it hears.

Many organizations launch their communication activities in an intuitive manner or repeat the same communication projects year after year without analyzing the outcomes. Although this 'strategy' is better than nothing, such organizations might not realize that they are wasting a lot of time, energy and money on communication activities that are not relevant anymore, that contradict one another or that are not aligned with the organization's objectives.

Just like any other managerial function, a communication programme must be driven in a strategic way. The process may be resumed in four words:

- 1 Research
- 2 Planning
- 3 Action
- 4 Evaluation

Why should an LGA bother going through all these steps?

Decentralization and empowerment cannot succeed if the LGA lacks the ability to communicate with all its partners, be they employees, Board members, civil society, the citizens at large or various spheres of government.

Among the *LGA employees and members of the Executive Board*, the adoption and implementation of an *internal communication* programme contributes to the integration of employees and Board members, fosters a feeling of belonging to the organization, creates a healthy work environment and increases the efficiency of the organization. Internal communication develops a spirit of collaboration and better work relations.

External communication is vital as well. The LGA operating budget often relies on funding from the country's local governments; it has a responsibility to inform local governments' elected members and employees of how the money is spent and the type of services offered in return. External communication goes beyond the



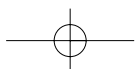
mandatory general assembly and legal obligations of accountability. A good communication plan establishes a dialogue between the LGA and its members, by informing the local governments of the services offered by the LGA; by explaining the LGA's priorities, projects and political positions; and by gathering the local governments' reactions and comments on all these issues.

Elected members and employees of the local governments represent the main external audience of the LGA, but there are other partners with whom the LGA has frequent contacts. The *national government, regional or provincial associations, various organizations at the national or international level, journalists, even citizens* of the country are all interacting with the LGA.

By being proactive in its communication with its partners and by establishing feedback mechanisms, the LGA will contribute furthermore to the building of local democracy. But this endeavour will need the full support of the LGA leadership. Four factors are essential to the success of an LGA communication programme:

- 1 The leadership is convinced of the importance of communication.
- 2 The leadership agrees that communication must be planned in a strategic way, just like any other managerial functions.
- 3 The leadership allows budget and resources (including a full-time professional communicator) for the communication actions of the LGA.
- 4 Finally, the leadership insists for regular updates of the communication strategy, because it knows that the situation is changing, just as the political and financial environments of the LGA are evolving from one year to the next.

This document can be used as an application-oriented, easy-reference manual in developing a communication strategy. It is especially tuned to local government institutes and LGAs whose leadership wishes to improve and to strengthen the way the organization communicates, both internally and externally. We are fully aware that communication projects may differ in complexity from country to country and even within an organization. Therefore, the described guidelines will not always be relevant for all cases. The interested LGA leadership can pick out whatever he or she thinks could be helpful to establish or improve the communication strategy.



WHAT IS A COMMUNICATION STRATEGY?

To launch an efficient communication programme, an organization must first get a clear understanding of its communication environment. It will define its *communication policy* and then establish the *objectives and priorities* of its communication programme – a programme that also carries the vision, the mission and the priorities of the organization. The next step is the *communication plan*, which lists a series of specific short, medium and long-term communication projects allowing the organization to both inform its partners and to listen to them. Once a *project* is executed, the organization measures its success by analyzing a series of simple *performance indicators* and starts planning the next series of communication actions.

The cycle involving all these elements – the communication policy, the communication objectives and priorities, the communication plan, the communication projects, the analysis of performance indicators – forms an organization's *communication strategy*.

1 The communication environment in your LGA: a diagnostic tool

Before starting to work on the LGA communication strategy, it is necessary to assess the state of communication in the organization. Even if your LGA is at the 'construction' stage, you will find this exercise useful.

A SPOKESPERSONS

Who are the people speaking *on behalf* of the LGA?

- The President of the LGA
- The Vice-Presidents of the LGA
- All the elected members of the LGA Executive Board
- The Executive Director of the LGA
- The Communication Officer of the LGA
- All the employees of the LGA
- Others

Comments on the spokespersons:

- To avoid confusions in the messages sent by the LGA, there should be a limited number of official spokespersons. Usually, the President of the Board or a Vice-President is assigned as the official LGA spokesperson and is the only one allowed to comment on political issues.
- It is necessary to have good feedback mechanism between the LGA employees and the spokespersons, so they can be briefed before giving an interview or speaking at a public event. If not, the spokespersons might not have enough information to properly express the positions of the LGA.
- One might consider the use of *key messages*: providing key messages around specific issues (particularly controversial ones) to the LGA spokespersons on a regular basis can be very effective in carrying the LGA points of view at various levels: community, provincial or national. It also ensures a unified message and avoids the impression there might be dissension among the membership.



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- Of course, the LGA Executive Director and the Communication Officer can provide factual information on LGA events and programmes, but they should restrain from giving any political comments.
- All the LGA members and employees represent the Association. Each time they express themselves on their affiliation with the LGA, they convey a message, good or bad, to the people around them. The LGA leadership must be aware of this and be attentive to the inner feelings of the staff and members.

B MESSAGES

What are the *main messages* the LGA is currently trying to convey?

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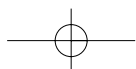
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Comments on the messages:

- The main messages of your LGA should be aligned with its strategic planning. Communication conveys the mission and the vision of the organization and helps to reach its goals and strategic priorities.
- If the LGA is promoting too many objectives at the same time, it will lose its focus and not be as efficient politically; the audiences will also be confused by the various messages coming from the LGA. You should establish your main communication objectives for the coming years and stick to these messages. We will get back to it in Section 3.
- Messages can be transmitted very informally, like in a conversation between two colleagues; or in a very formal manner, for example during a conference or through a paid advertisement in a newspaper.



C AUDIENCES

Who are the LGA audiences?

Internal audience

Members of the LGA Board
LGA employees
Others

External audience

Elected members of local governments
Employees of local governments
Provincial or regional associations
Elected members of the national government
Employees of the national government
Members of related organizations
Public affairs and political journalists
Citizens of the country, possibly organised in civil society organisations
LGAs in other countries
Donors
Others

Comments on the audiences

Whether a message is aimed at an internal or external audience, it deserves a different approach:

Internally

- Employees and Board members require in-depth information on all the projects and political decisions of the LGA. They should receive this information long before it is released to the public, so they can be prepared for any consequence it may have on their work. Staff and Board members may also have interesting suggestions that will make the project even better.
- Unlike the external audiences, employees are also interested in very 'internal' news, such as birthdays and nominations of colleagues, training opportunities, office parties, etc.

Externally

- Employees and elected members of the local government also require in-depth information, especially on technical issues. They need to know who to contact if they have questions.

- When informing your external audiences, do not presume that they know every detail about the LGA; do not use complicated acronyms or law numbers unless you are certain that your audience understands what they mean.
- Generally, the public-at-large (the citizens of the country) does not need detailed or complex information, but only wants an outline of the situation. Include contact information for those who might want additional information.

D TOOLS

What *tools* are used by the LGA to transmit messages to the various audiences?

- Logo
- Conversations in person
- Telephone calls
- Letters
- Business cards
- Emails
- Billboards
- Banners
- Meetings
- Seminars
- Circular or membership letters
- Conferences
- Government hearings
- Brochures
- Posters
- Magazines or bulletins
- News releases
- Paid advertisements
- Interviews
- Sponsored television or radio shows
- Others

Comments on the tools:

- Before spending time and money on developing a tool, make sure it is appropriate and that it will reach the targeted audience. Is the audience literate? Aim for simplicity.
- Adapt the text in function of your target audience. Information brochures should be written in everyday language, unlike policy documents.
- Plan for the distribution of your information material: there are costs and time constraints associated with mailing.

- To reach the public-at-large, consider radio and newspaper advertisements. It is rarely necessary (or appropriate) for an LGA to spend a big budget on costly television advertisements.
- The LGA might even be able to get a sponsorship from a private-sector company, who will cover part of the costs of the material in exchange for some visibility.

E FEEDBACK

Good communication goes both ways, because the organization must *inform* and *listen* to its audiences, give them the option to reply, comment, congratulate, protest or ask for more information.

What tools are available to *transmit comments and ask questions to the LGA?*

- Telephone
- Directory of LGA members
- Website
- Intranet
- Email
- Mail
- Readers' corner of the LGA's newsletter
- In person at the LGA offices
- In a suggestions box at the LGA offices
- During discussions and question periods at the LGA annual assembly
- Others

Comments on the feedback tools:

- The only way the LGA can develop appropriate services and policies is by listening to its members.
- Make sure that all the information material mentions the LGA address and its phone number.
- In most countries, a link to a Website and an email address are now expected from any serious organization. If the LGA has a website, make sure that the link appears on all the information material.
- If the LGA employees have email accounts, they must treat the emails received as if they were 'regular' letters. Employees must verify daily if they have received new emails and *reply in a timely manner*.

F OBSTACLES

Even the best-planned communication can face obstacles. These can be 'physical' obstacles (a bad telephone line, a letter lost in the mail, background noises during a conversation, a misspelled word in a letter, the overabundance of competing information) or 'emotional' noises (a personality conflict between the emitter and the receptor, cultural or linguistic differences, confusion about the mission of the LGA).

What are the most obvious *problems that can affect the LGA* in its communication with various audiences?

- Lack of communication between the LGA Board and the LGA employees
- Lack of communication among the LGA employees themselves
- Infrequent meetings of the LGA Board
- Scarcity of financial or human resources necessary to produce information material
- LGA leadership does not believe in the importance of communication
- Misunderstanding of the LGA mission; confusion between the LGA and other government organizations
- Cultural or linguistic differences within the country
- Political tensions between the local and national governments
- Illiteracy of the population
- Population scattered over a large territory
- Lack of interest from journalists on local government topics
- Others

Comments on the obstacles:

- In countries with more than one official language, the LGA must consider translating its information material and organizing regional events in the language of the local population.
- In countries with a low level of literacy, the LGA printed material should rely on illustrations, such as posters, photos, caricatures, etc.
- If there is a great difference between the local governments in urban settings and those in rural areas, the LGA should ensure that both sectors are well represented in the information material.
- The constant use of the logo helps to identify any material produced by the LGA.
- 'Knowledge is power'. The LGA leadership must understand that by informing its employees, members and partners, it is empowering them.
- As was said earlier, communication needs to be planned in a strategic way. If a Communication Officer undertakes various projects without a structure and a plan, much effort will be wasted on contradicting projects.

2 Writing the communication policy

Just like any policy document, a communication policy regroups the LGA principles, procedures, guidelines, directives, etc., related to communicating with both the internal and the external public. It takes into account the conclusions reached when filing the above 'Diagnostic' (see Section 1). Above all, the communication policy must be entirely aligned with the LGA strategic planning plan (see brochure *Strategic Planning Manual*, VNG International, 2004).

Preparing the communication policy requires time and attention to details, because this document will act as the backbone of the LGA communication programme for many years to come. The LGA communication policy should contain the following information and any other relevant material related to the field of communication:

A The LGA context

- Vision of the LGA
- Mission of the LGA
- Positioning (or slogan) of the LGA
- Corporate values of the LGA
- Priorities of the LGA

B The role of communication within the LGA

- Who is the official spokesperson on political issues: the President of the Executive Board? A Vice-president? Can the Director of the LGA speak on behalf of the Association?
- What is the title and name of the employee responsible for communication? What position does this person occupy in the LGA organizational chart?

Most national organizations now employ at least one *Communication Officer*, an expert in organizational communication.

For an LGA, a *dedicated employee working exclusively on the LGA communications is not a luxury, but a necessity*. This situation is due in part to the fact that the LGA members are located all over the country, but also because of the important lobbying role of the LGA. With the help of a full- or part-time professional communicator, the LGA can turn these challenges into assets.

The Communication Officer must be allowed to work in close collaboration with the LGA leadership.

- If there is a whole communication team, what are the responsibilities of each employee?
- What part of the overall LGA budget is assigned to the communication sector (salaries and its operating budget)?

C An analysis of the audiences

Who is in contact with the LGA? The LGA must be aware of its various audiences, in order to develop the right tools to communicate with them.

- Internal audiences
 - > LGA employees
 - > Members of the Executive board
- External audiences
 - > Elected members and employees of local governments
 - > Provincial or regional associations
 - > Elected members and employees of the national government
 - > Members of related organizations
 - > Journalists
 - > Citizens, possibly organised in civil society organisations
 - > LGAs in other countries
 - > Others

EXAMPLE: DEVELOPING AN INTERNAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The Association of Municipalities in El Salvador COMURES (Corporación de Municipalidades de la República de El Salvador) got involved in an inspiring process of renewal and revitalization after the civil war in El Salvador. Its external communication was already being transformed into a more effective policy, and next to that the LGA aimed to improve its internal communication practices.

First of all an analysis of the existing organisation was made, including a list of wishes and complaints of the members and staff. It showed that the lack of a free flow of information was considered one of the main problems the LGA experienced. Although the staff of COMURES was considered very committed and hard working, the organisation was seen as an 'island of kingdoms'. However, in order to be able to answer all kinds of questions from members, the staff needed to have access to relevant information.

To that end, several concrete proposals were developed. The first proposal suggested that the head of the communication-department attended - as an observer - all meetings of the Executive Board. By doing so she could advise the Board on how to communicate decisions made and agreements reached during the meeting to the outside world. The second proposal was linked to the first

and suggested that the communication-staff had to meet the day after the Executive Board on a fixed moment with a fixed agenda to discuss the advice to the Board, including the question which communication instruments could be used best.

Another proposal referred to the creation of an intranet-connection for all employees to exchange information. By creating such a system employees could be easily updated on developments and results achieved in other departments. Other proposals concerned the (re)structuring of meetings and agendas, the organisation of internal seminars, and the organisation of the information and documentation centre in a more professional way.

The main advantage of these proposals was that they were all very easy to implement, did not require big investments but did have quick and very tangible results.

D A detailed description of all the LGA communication practices

- Description and detailed *use of the logo*.
- Designation process for the LGA *spokesperson*: Who briefs the official spokesperson before an important meeting, a press conference, an interview? Who can replace the official spokesperson if he or she is not available to give an interview to the media? Are there 'regional' or 'provincial' spokespersons who can talk about regional issues?
- *Process for giving an interview to a journalist*: If a reporter wants to know the LGA official position on a political issue, what happens? The LGA staff and Executive Board members should always know how to handle such requests.
- *Approval process* for the LGA communication projects: Who has the signing authority on the various steps involved in producing a publication or organizing an event, for example? Is the Communication Officer entirely responsible for his or her work? Must the Executive Director approve everything or just the concept and final product? What is the level of involvement of the Executive Board in the approval process of communication projects?
- Rules regarding the sale of *advertisement, sponsorships* and the endorsement of commercial enterprises: If it agrees to get sponsors for its events or publications, how can the LGA ensure that it will not be associated in a controversy?
- '*Mandatory*' communication projects: Are there projects that must be undertaken on a regular basis, such as an annual report, a general assembly, a survey of the members, etc?
- Etc.

The communication policy should be consulted regularly, especially while preparing a new communication plan. Each member of the Executive Board should have a copy of it, as well as all the employees of the LGA.

The communication policy should be updated when necessary, for example after a change in the LGA constitution or structure, a major shift in the national political landscape, etc.

E The LGA logo

As any organization, a Local Government Association needs a logo. If your LGA is new and does not have a logo yet, ask a professional graphic designer to develop it. The logo will be the LGA corporate identity, its visual signature for many years to come.

Even if your LGA already has an established logo, it is a good idea to take a few minutes to look at it.

- From a technical point of view, the logo is easily reproduced or adapted in various formats and sizes **YES/ NO**
- The logo has no more than three colours (more colours increase the printing costs unnecessarily) **YES/ NO**
- The logo is designed with simple lines and it is easy to recognize when reproduced on business cards, letterhead, t-shirts, etc. **YES/ NO**
- The logo is not mistaken with other logos of similar organizations, including governmental organizations **YES/ NO**
- The logo is coherent with the LGA values **YES/ NO**

Remember: a badly designed logo can cost a lot of money in unnecessary printing cost and it can even affect the reputation of the LGA.

If needed, an organization can change its logo: because the mandate of the organization has evolved, because the logo has an outdated look, etc. Some organizations do it after 10 or 20 years.

Changing a logo is a complex task that should not be taken lightly. The renewal of all printed material with the new logo will be costly, but can be stretched over a period of one year or more.

3 Establishing communication objectives and strategies

Starting a communication project without having a communication plan is like jumping on a bus without knowing where it is heading. Before the LGA starts to work on specific communication initiatives, it must establish the LGA communication long and medium-term objectives, and then think about the various strategies that will make these objectives reachable.

As an example, here is a sample series of communication objectives and strategies, from the *Unión Nacional de Gobiernos Locales*, Costa-Rica's Local Government Association.

LONG-TERM OBJECTIVES (5 YEARS)

Objectives

Strategies

1 Establish the UNGL as the representative municipal regime in Costa Rica

- a) Inform on the mission, the functions and the actions of the UNGL
- b) Promote collaboration with strategic partners at the national and international level
- c) Reinforce the UNGL brand (reputation, logo, image, etc.)
- d) Elaborate a punctual training programme for the newly elected (both at the local and national level)

2 Raise the media's responsiveness to the municipal sector in order to raise a positive media coverage

- e) Organize training events for journalists
- f) Increase the number of articles and TV/radio shows featuring municipal issues in a positive light
- g) Start an advertising campaign through paid advertisements, in various media
- h) Promote the members of the UNGL technical unit as experts available to comment the news (good governance, taxation, environmental issues...)
- i) Help Costa Rican cities in getting better at promoting themselves

MEDIUM-TERM OBJECTIVES (2-3 YEARS)

Objectives

Strategies

3 Develop a bi-directional communication

- j) Exchange best practices at the municipal level
- k) Establish a network of contacts in each municipality
- l) Favour in-person events that encourage personal contacts
- m) Develop existing tools to promote the exchange of information
- n) Use new technologies to facilitate the exchange of information

4 Integrate the corporate values of the UNGL

- o) Educate staff members and members of the Executive Board on the corporate values
- p) Create a climate favourable to institutional change
- q) Share information on municipal issues with staff members and members of the Executive Board



4 Elaborating the communication plan

Compared to the *communication policy*, which is a reference guide that sets the LGA rules and guidelines for years to come, the *communication plan* is a series of tangible projects (events, publications, programmes, etc.) that help the LGA reach its goals.

Arising from the communication objectives and strategies, the projects are aimed either at the internal and external audience, and can be sporadic or regular projects, on a short, medium or long-term basis. The projects also include feedback mechanisms, such as surveys of the membership and visits of the local governments, in order to foster exchanges between the LGA and its members.

The communication plan lists *all* the communication projects that the LGA will undertake in the coming year and provides the following information for each item:

- Name of the project
- Description of the project
- Person or sector responsible within the LGA
- Partners, if the project is developed in collaboration
- Date of beginning and deadline (if any) of the project
- Audiences (Who is this project developed for?)
- Indicators (how will the LGA measure the success of the project?)
- Budget assigned specifically to this project
- Etc.

The list of projects included in a communication plan *can* be very detailed, but it does not *have* to be. What counts is the level of thought that goes with the preparation of the communication plan and the commitment, by the LGA, to deliver as many of these projects as possible, within the established time frame and on budget.

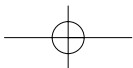
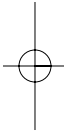
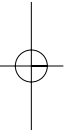
The communication plan is a dynamic document that should be rewritten every year, in accordance to the LGA budget and priorities. A communication plan can also be written for a specific project of major importance, for example to promote a national conference organized by the LGA.

The following excerpts are taken from a communication plan developed by the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (SCTM), in Serbia.



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(...) INTERNAL AUDIENCE - OBJECTIVE 1.2 | COMMUNICATING WITH SCTM MEMBERS

Activity	Responsible person(s)	Audiences	Time frame/ deadline
Launching and regularly sending electronic reminder 'Web info'	Communication Team	Elected members and municipal employees; partner associations	Once a week
Publication of bulletin 'SCTM Info'	Communication Team	Elected members and municipal employees; partner associations; government	Every two months
Presenting SCTM to newly elected local officials	General Secretary, Communication Team	Newly elected officials	Project preparation: One month before local elections Implementation: 45 days from elections
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

Comments/recommendations	Performance indicators	Budget
<p>This reminder aims to inform members and audiences about the SCTM website and new elements of its content. It shall have the form of an e-mail with links to new elements on the SCTM website.</p>	<p>Number of electronic reminders sent Number of visitors to the Web site after the distribution of a reminder</p>	<p>XX \$</p>
<p>'SCTM Info' is one of the official papers of the organization. Its function is to inform members and the public about the events and activities of SCTM. Given the importance of the flow of information, it would be good to raise the publication to a monthly bulletin. The bulletin should be sent regularly in electronic form as well. Communication Team shall develop procedures, related to information, which will be published in the Bulletin.</p>	<p>Bulletin issued regularly Publishing increased to every month Comments from readers Distribution of bulletin in electronic format; list extended to include government agencies, NGOs, media, etc.</p>	<p>XX \$</p>
<p>Bearing in mind that 2004 is the election year and that during the year local elections will be held, SCTM must prepare and implement a series of actions, aiming to present the Association, its activities and its opportunities to newly elected local officials.</p>	<p>Meeting with newly elected officials Level of participation to the events Comments from participants</p>	<p>XX \$</p>
<p>Etc.</p>	<p>Etc.</p>	<p>Etc.</p>

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(...) EXTERNAL AUDIENCE – OBJECTIVE 2 | COMMUNICATING WITH THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS

Activity	Responsible person(s)	Audiences	Time frame/ deadline
Visits to media	Communication Officer, Executive Director	Journalists who follow the area SCTM is interested in	Until April 1st 2004
Preparing and sending statements	Communication Officer	Journalists, editorialists	Regular activity
Contact with local media	Communication Officer	Journalists in the regional and local media	Regular activity
Etc.	Etc.	Etc.	Etc.

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Comments/recommendations	Performance indicators	Budget
<p>Standing Conference should make contacts with the media more frequent. One of the efficient ways to establish good communication and cooperation is to organize visits with the media, where the SCTM delegation will become acquainted with management of media and introduce the Organization.</p>	<p>List of media visited List of journalists met Press coverage resulting from the visits Increase contacts with the journalists met</p>	<p>XX \$</p>
<p>Statements are a way of communication that reflects what the organization thinks about certain issues. It can be a reaction to a particular event important for the Organization. SCTM should go public in this way more often. Topic of statement can be any SCTM Committee meeting that addressed major issues related to the work of local government. SCTM must react to events much faster.</p>	<p>Increase number of statements distributed Shorter reaction time between event and distribution of statement Number of statements being quoted by media Requests for interviews resulting from the statements</p>	<p>0\$</p>
<p>There are great numbers of local media and founders of majority of the media are local governments. Establishing cooperation with the local media will make it possible to simultaneously raise certain issues, important for local government, in great number of local media. It is also possible to organize a network of these media.</p>	<p>Number of contacts with local media Coverage in the local media Creation of a mailing list of local media Creation of a network of local journalists</p>	<p>XX \$</p>
<p>Etc.</p>	<p>Etc.</p>	

5 A few communication tools

The communication plan in Section 4 listed just a few of the tools and projects available to an LGA. There are many more possible devices for communicating, both internally and externally: imagination and budget are the only elements limiting your choice of communication tools. However, we cannot stress enough the importance of *choosing tools that are appropriate for the audience* you are trying to reach. The costliest projects are not always the most efficient, quite the contrary.

Some tools are appropriate for LGAs that have been established for some years and that already have a strong communication culture. A new LGA should select tools that are simpler to produce, in order to gain experience before undertaking more complex projects.

Some companies may agree to partially fund the LGA communication projects, if these sponsors see a potential benefit for themselves regarding visibility, reputation and potential customers. The sponsors will usually ask that their logo appear on the publication or on the site of the event. Associate the LGA only with businesses that are not controversial.

A Printed material

Whenever there are printing costs involved, remember that a big, complex document, using lots of colours on a glossy paper, means higher printing costs. Before starting to work on the design of your document, contact a few printers and ask for ways to save on your budget.

- **Bulletin:** weekly, monthly, bimonthly, quarterly; printed or prepared in electronic format; sent by mail, by fax or by email. The bulletin is one of the best tools to keep members informed of the LGA projects. The bulletin must contain useful information for the readers and be appealing to them; it should contain short articles on interesting issues, not long transcripts of legal documents; 'action' photos of members and partners doing field work, rather than static and repetitive photos of the LGA Board members in meetings.
- **Letters:** a 2-3 pages information letter on a technical matter or a new policy can be produced faster, and at lesser costs, than a special issue of the bulletin; it can then be distributed to specific audiences, like employees of the local governments, for example.
- **Directory of members:** to promote interactions among members, the LGA can prepare a directory listing the names (phone/fax/ /email/mail address) of elected members and key local employees, separated by province, then by district. Such a directory must be updated every one or two years. In countries where Internet access is common and inexpensive, the directory could be available on the LGA website, to cut on printing and distribution costs.
- **Brochure or guide:** explaining what the LGA is or featuring various issues related to local government (internal procedures, new legislations, how to organize consultative meetings).

- **Poster:** must be on a specific issue (e.g. environment, democracy), not just to promote the LGA.
- **Calendar:** featuring picturesque photos sent by various local governments.
- **Invitation:** to an event, a news conference, the annual assembly.
- **Map of the country:** not a tourist map, but a tool with information on each local government.
- **Annual report:** internal or external.
- **Press review:** photocopies of articles mentioning the LGA can be distributed to the LGA partners and members.
- **Promotional items:** pens, t-shirts, bags...
- **Business cards** of employees and Board members

EXAMPLE: DEVELOPING A FORMULA FOR A NEWSLETTER AND MAGAZINE

Communication tools that are used by many LGAs are the newsletter and magazine. Over the years, VNG International has worked with many sister associations (e.g. ALAT in Tanzania, SCTM in Serbia, UoM in Montenegro and COMURES in El Salvador) on the development of a formula for a newsletter and regular periodical.

One of the specific advantages of a newsletter and a magazine is the fact that members get a concrete and tangible product informing them on the developments within their Association. In addition, newsletters and periodicals can be linked with the website of the Associations which creates an extra interactive communication instrument.

The newsletter is an instrument that is considered appropriate for specific target-group directed information with detailed facts and figures. Imaginable is for instance a newsletter on legal questions with information on new laws or a newsletter about specific financial questions sent regularly to municipal officials. In most cases a monthly edition of four pages (one page double folded) is enough and can quite easily be produced and printed.

On the contrary, the magazine is an instrument of a clear journalistic character and aimed at a broader audience such as: municipalities, central government officials, donors etc. The content is always based on journalistic principles and on a limited, planned amount of pages with (cover-)stories, interviews, news-in-short, analyses about new (political) developments which have influence on local democracy, and comments of the Board of the Association. Next to that the magazine can include news on the LGA itself: a current agenda about coming events, workshops, congresses, seminars, etc. If producing a magazine is considered too expensive, advertisements can help to reduce the costs.

In all the countries mentioned above, the comments of readers were stimulating and specifically referred to the fact that the newsletter and magazine made the LGA more visible and showed concrete results of its work and achievements, which contributed to the overall image of the Association.

B Audiovisual material and visual support

These items enhance the LGA presence during a conference or a seminar.

- **Transparencies**, electronic or printed (e.g. PowerPoint): in order to keep the public interested, the speaker should not repeat word for word what appears on the transparency, but use this visual support to illustrate his presentation, especially if it is on a complex issue.
- **Diaporama**: slides are not as popular as they used to be, but they are still an option and are much cheaper than a video.
- **Video**: very costly to produce and serves only a limited purpose. After a few months, the video will already seem obsolete.
- **Banner**: the LGA should have a few banners displaying the LGA name and its logo. Banners take only a few seconds to install in a conference room. They identify the LGA as the organizer of an event, not only for the participants, but also in the newspapers and on television if the media are attending this event.

C Electronic communications

Before elaborating a costly electronic tool, the LGA must ensure that its members will be able to use it. Many organizations have invested a lot of time and money in a state-of-the-art web site, but their main audiences are not yet equipped with the material needed to consult the new site. Such web sites are often abandoned by their organizations after only a few months.

- **Web site**: for information on the LGA, names and titles of the employees and Board members, updates on upcoming events, copies of press releases, position on political issues, etc. In countries where Internet connection can be slow, it is much wiser to create a simple web site with very few photos and illustrations. It is never necessary to use animation on a web site; although it can create an interesting effect, it will slow down the connection to the site and visitors will quickly grow tired of this trick.
- **Intranet**: web site for the exclusive use of the LGA members. Visitors need a password to access it. The intranet contains specific information related to the work of the members.
- **Electronic message board**: from the website, a space where members of the LGA can exchange information, ask questions, share similar experiences and help one another, even if they are scattered all over the country.
- **Teleconference over the phone**: not available in every country, but it can save on transportation costs in countries where Executive Board members must travel over long distances.

D Events

Events are an important element of a good communication programme, because so much relies on personal interactions. The LGA can also participate in events organized by its partners.

- **Public assembly**: inviting members to meetings in various cities to discuss topics of interests

- **Training for new members / staff:** especially important for newly elected Board members who are not familiar with the LGA, its mandate and its functioning
- **'Open Doors' event:** on a given day, citizens are invited to visit the headquarters of local governments and meet with the elected members and employees throughout the country.
- **Reception:** to announce the launch of the LGA bulletin, a move to new offices, to celebrate a landmark event, etc.
- **Training seminar:** offered to elected members and employees of the local governments.
- **Kiosk:** the LGA is present at a fair, an exhibition related to local government.

E Consultation tools

Never forget to *listen* to your audience. Feedback on the LGA operations is rarely given in a spontaneous manner, so it will often be necessary to provoke reactions from your audiences. The information you will get in return is priceless.

- **Survey:** at the end of each LGA public event; sent every year in the bulletin; mail or emailed to all members, etc.
- **Round tables:** conferences on specific subjects, with lecturers from various backgrounds.
- **Regional tours:** LGA leadership visits various local governments to exchange on important issues.
- **Suggestion box:** in the LGA offices, so visitors can leave a note with their ideas and comments.
- **Reply coupon:** in each issue of the LGA bulletin, asking for suggestions.
- **Email address of the LGA:** visible on the LGA Web site and on business cards of all employees.
- **Query or complaint:** when the LGA receives a query or a complaint, establish a system to ensure that there will be a personal follow-up.

F Media

- **Paid advertisement:** in newspapers, magazines or on the radio. NOTE: publicity on television is extremely expensive; it is rarely a good idea for a non-commercial organization to spend a big section of its budget on television advertisement.
- **News conference:** only for major newsworthy announcements.
- **Regular column:** some media, especially alternative media, might be interested in offering some regular space to the LGA and its members, whether it is free or against a small charge.
- **News release:** only for really newsworthy announcements. It is not always necessary to write an official news release and send it to every journalist in the country; once a Communication Officer has developed a working relationship with various reporters, a simple phone call or email to the right person is often all that is needed to get some news coverage

Media relations are a complex part of the communication strategy, yet they can become one of the strongest communication tools. It deserves a section by itself, which we will see next (Section 6).

6 Dealing with the press

We cannot deny the importance of the media in today's society. The LGA, as a national entity representing the local governments, must establish good relationships with the country's journalists covering political issues. This is true everywhere, even in countries where most of the journalists work for the state.

A Reactive media relations

At some point, any national organization will be contacted by the media to comment on questions associated to its field of operation. In the case of an LGA, it means journalists will want to know the LGA position on issues related to local government, funding to the municipal level, new legislation, etc.

You must seize this opportunity to promote the LGA, even if this is in an indirect fashion. By being present in the media, especially as an expert organization, the LGA will gain credibility.

- Make sure that the telephone calls or the emails of a reporter are answered extremely quickly – within the hour – with the appropriate information. If the journalist wants an interview, the Communication Officer will make arrangements with the appropriate spokesperson.
- Ensure that the LGA staff and Executive Board members all know what the appropriate way to handle a media request is.
- If a crisis related to local government arises, be ready – the media should be contacting the LGA shortly, even if the Association is not directly involved. Make sure that the spokesperson has been briefed and knows the issue well.

B Proactive media relations

Organizations with a good communication strategy not only respond to media requests: they generate these requests. The LGA should make regular efforts to be present in the newspapers and magazines, on the radio or on television.

- Prepare a daily press review of all the articles related to local government; circulate copies of the most interesting articles to members of the staff and the Executive Board. Archive the articles. Use this press review to:
 - > Know the journalists who work on public affairs and politics; learn what interests them.
 - > Follow the national and local news; connect what is happening with LGA issues and try to raise the interest of the media.

> Establish the LGA as a think-tank of local government experts, by offering comments of the LGA spokesperson and the members of the technical unit on topics that are currently in the news.

- Before sending a news release or announcing a press conference, be certain that what you are going to announce is truly 'news'. Will it interest the media? Why would a journalist care about what you want to announce? Find an angle to your news that makes it interesting for someone not working daily in local government. When your 'news' is not of interest to the journalists, don't announce it. (If the LGA gets a reputation for sending uninteresting information, the journalists will stop reading its releases, they will not attend the conferences and they will not report on the LGA.)
- Prepare news releases on 'success stories' – they can be LGA or municipal projects – and send them to the media as feature ideas.
- While organizing a news conference, create 'photo-opportunities' that will illustrate the message you are trying to convey. Get out of the conference room and give the conference in a place that is relevant to your message. Be imaginative.
- Prepare 'letters to the editors' signed by the LGA President or the Executive Director, on local government issues. Send the letters to various newspapers in a timely manner.
- 'Open line' radio or television shows (where the public can call and ask questions on specific issues) are often looking for guests. Offer the services of the LGA spokesperson.
- Negotiate with community radios or television stations, to launch regular shows devoted to local government issues. Offer this platform to the LGA members. Do the same thing with newspapers.
- Do not forget the local media and the specialized press (for example, publications focusing on the environment or on management issues).
- Be also in contact with electronic media on the Internet. If there are no relevant 'e-publications' in your country, there may be some in neighbouring countries or specialized publications at the continental level who would be interested in news from the LGA.

EXAMPLE: SEMINAR FOR BETTER RELATIONS BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND THE MUNICIPAL SECTOR

In Costa Rica, the *Unión Nacional de Gobiernos Locales* (UNGL) had been an active LGA for over 25 years. In collaboration with VNG International, it implemented an organizational development programme with the goal of strengthening three elements of the UNGL: management, from a technical and political point-of-view; communication; and promotion of municipal best practices.

Once it established its main objectives, the UNGL identified its communication objectives and strategies. One of the objectives adopted was to raise the sensitivity of Costa Rican media towards the municipal sector in order to get positive coverage. The communication strategies included an increased collaboration with the municipalities in order to help them get better at the divulgation of their activities.

With that in mind, the UNGL leadership and its communication officer developed a series of one-day events for a better understanding between media members and the municipal world. The activities scheduled during the one-day events included roundtables with reporters and elected municipal officials. Training sessions focused on what journalists want and how to interact with them. Some participants were filmed during a fake press conference and then received tips on how to give better interviews. At the end of the day, the UNGL distributed a brochure on good media relations.

These events were made possible with the help of communication officers from major Costa Rican cities and, in some cases, a local firm specialized in public relations, but the UNGL was clearly identified as the main organizer.

Mayors, elected members of municipal councils, and employees from rural and urban municipalities attended the events, along with members of national, regional and alternative press. The one-day events were organized in every region of the country. Attendance rate was high.

After each event, participants filled in a questionnaire on their level of satisfaction. This survey and the appraisal of LGA staff members were used as performance indicators; adjustments were made after each event in reaction to comments received.

The one-day events on media relations corresponded with the UNGL main objectives as well as its communication objectives and strategies. They were well planned, well executed, evaluated and improved during the course of the programme.

C Media relations in a time of crisis

Imagine a hypothetical situation, for example a conflict between the LGA and the government or internal dissatisfaction among the LGA members regarding the management of the Association. A journalist learns about it. How should the LGA deal with the media in such a situation?

If the LGA refuses to answer difficult questions or pretends that everything is 'business as usual', the media and the public will feel that the LGA is hiding a dreadful secret – much more terrible than the truth. The way to deal with the media in a time of crisis is to be open and honest, and to stay calm.

- There are various ways to react to negative coverage in a newspaper, on radio or on TV:
 - > Contact the journalist involved and offer an interview with the LGA spokesperson, so the journalist can learn about the LGA position.
 - > Within one or two days, send a letter to the editor of the newspaper, signed by the Executive Board members, clarifying the LGA position.
 - > If there are a lot of media asking for an interview, it might be more convenient to quickly organize a press conference, where all the questions will be answered in one single session.
- Before the spokesperson gives an interview or speaks at a press conference, he or she must be very well briefed and have mastered the main messages to be communicated. Think of all the questions that the media may ask and find the appropriate answer – before the interview.
- If the habitual LGA spokesperson is involved in a controversy, another spokesperson should be selected until the crisis is resolved. It must be someone who is not personally involved. Exceptionally, consider the Executive Director or the LGA Communication Officer as potential spokespersons.
- There are always two sides to a story; the spokesperson should remain as neutral as possible and try to understand the positions of both parties.
- Unless lawyers are involved and have suggested that an issue must not be commented, it is never a good idea to reply 'No comment' when a reporter asks a question. It is much better to be honest, explain briefly what the situation is and how the LGA leadership is currently working at fixing the problem so that all the parties involved are satisfied.
- Of course, this last statement must be true: the LGA leadership must be actively looking for solutions during this time of crisis! Communication is not covering up the truth or making the truth more beautiful than it really is. The LGA messages are only as good as the LGA actions. The spokesperson must never tell a lie during an interview.
- If the journalist asks a question and the spokesperson does not know the answer, he or she must simply say 'I do not know...' and can offer to call the reporter back when the information will be known.
- A good communicator can always turn negative coverage into a positive story. Try to find the angle that will feature the LGA strong point. Show how the LGA is getting better at what it is doing.

7 Evaluating the results of the LGA communication programme

When preparing the LGA communication plan, you have included a list of indicators for each project. Certain evaluation factors are *quantitative* (number of journalists attending a conference, percentage of local employees who participated in an LGA event), while others are *qualitative* (increase in the level of satisfaction towards local governments, in-depth articles in national newspapers).

Make sure to *evaluate* each project based on these indicators. For example:

- At the end of a training session, ask participating members to fill in a one-page survey. Analyze their comments. Adapt the following session accordingly.
- Keep track of requests from members asking for LGA brochures, posters and other forms of information material. What products are the more popular? Are the members always asking for a directory, even though the LGA does not produce one? Do they keep asking for a brochure that went out of print years ago?
- Analysis of the number of telephone calls, faxes and emails sent to the LGA, requesting information. Do the numbers rise after the LGA bulletin is sent to members? After an article appeared in a national newspaper?
- Evaluate not only the quantity, but also the quality of the media coverage over the years. Are the articles about local government becoming more in-depth and more positive?
- Ask your webmaster or your Internet provider for the numbers of visitors to your web site. When are there more visitors – after the distribution of the LGA bulletin by email, after a news conference?

With the results of these evaluations in mind, re-evaluate your communication projects and make the adjustments that are needed.

The LGA communication plan must be rewritten regularly, ideally every year. The special projects that have been a success can become regular programmes; other activities, that were not so successful, must either be adapted or cancelled.

The budget assigned to each project might change; for example, if the bulletin is to be published more often, the LGA must consider that the printing and distribution costs will also increase – where will the additional money come from?

From time to time, you should also evaluate the overall communication strategy, especially if there is a major change to the LGA context (amendments to the LGA constitution, change in government, new partnerships with related organizations, enhanced collaboration with specific media, major sponsorship, etc.)

Conclusions

Remember that developing an efficient and energetic communication programme is probably the best investment possible for an efficient and energetic Local Government Association:

'There is little point in an LGA having strong policies and ideas if they cannot be communicated effectively to others, and do not influence the broader environment of public administration and governance.'

To achieve this, the LGA needs the support of its leadership; a dedicated employee working specifically on the communication programme; a plan and a budget; and great ideas on how to reach its audiences and how to listen to them.

Does your LGA have such great ideas? Did you develop an original communication product that you would like to share with other Associations around the world? Contact VNG International. We would like to hear about it.

Would you like to receive complete copies of the documents referenced in this brochure, to help you build your own communication strategy? Contact VNG International. We will be delighted to send the documents to you.

International co-operation agency of the association of netherlands municipality

Committed to strengthening democratic local government worldwide

The key task of VNG International is strengthening democratic local government. It is a small, dynamic company annually managing some 60 plus projects and programmes with a focus on decentralisation and capacity-building. VNG International supports local governments, their associations and training institutions in developing countries and countries in transition.

VNG International's approach

For VNG International, strengthening democratic local government means working on three inter-related levels:

- the individual level – training and motivating municipal staff and elected representatives;
- the organisational level – advising local authorities on their organisation structures and working methods;
- the institutional level – adapting financial relations, laws and institutional arrangements.

The VNG International approach builds on:

- Colleague-to-colleague co-operation
- Institutional linking

United Cities and Local Governments

Founded in May 2004, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is the united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government. UCLG is the largest local government organisation in the world and is based in Barcelona, Spain.

Representing over half the world's population, the city and association members of UCLG are present in 127 UN Member States across seven world regions – Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Euro-Asia, Middle East and West Asia, Latin America and North America. Its membership includes 1000 leading cities and virtually all the existing national Local Government Associations in the world.

Worldwide, the capacity, resources, influence and range of activities of Local Government Associations vary enormously. Local Government Associations have a key role to play in development, decentralisation and effective governance, but often need strengthening, before they can effectively support their individual local government members, or liaise well with central government, donors and other actors.

Building on the Association Capacity Building (ACB) concept pioneered by the global network of local governments, UCLG works to strengthen the capacity of the associations within its network through lobbying, encouraging cooperation and exchange of experience between its members, and through working with its members and partners on initiatives such as the Association Building for Good Local Governance programme.