INTERNAL AUDIT DIVISION

REPORT 2018/104

Audit of the strategic communications programme in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

The Mission needed to periodically update the communication strategy and key messaging of its priorities

30 October 2018
Assignment No. AP 2018/630/01

**Audit of the strategic communications programme in the
United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of the strategic communications programme in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) to review the adequacy and effectiveness of UNAMA's planning, implementation and monitoring of the programme. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2018 and included work planning and risk management, work plan implementation and performance monitoring, and management of the Strategic Communications Service.

UNAMA planned and carried out the strategic communications programme in coordination with stakeholders. However, to enhance the programme, UNAMA needed to periodically update its communication strategy and key messaging.

OIOS made three recommendations. To address issues identified in the audit, UNAMA needed to:

- Review and update the 2016 communications strategy in line with latest mandate and the strategic framework of the Mission;

- Regularly revise key messaging on the Mission's priorities to ensure consistency in the Mission's core narratives; and

- Train staff in the Strategic Communications Service to adequately document the basis for selecting media partners for outreach programmes to ensure competitiveness and enhance transparency, and systematically archive media outreach programmes.

UNAMA accepted the recommendations and has initiated action to implement them.

CONTENTS

Audit of strategic communications programme in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

I.   BACKGROUND

1.   The Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) conducted an audit of the strategic communications programme in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

2.   The Strategic Communications Service (SCS) in UNAMA is responsible for the development and implementation of the Mission's strategic communications programme in line with its mandate. The goals of SCS are to: (a) coordinate with substantive offices to support the peace process through engaging parties to the conflict and generating support for national reconciliation; (b) foster a positive image of the Mission among the host population and international audiences; (c) manage threats to personnel by countering inaccurate and antagonistic media campaigns, and providing timely information on potential threats; and (d) minimize the impact of crises on the reputation of the Mission by providing information on a need to know basis.

3.   SCS is composed of five units: Media Relations, Media Monitoring and Analysis, Print and Digital media, Outreach and Audio-visual and Administration. Its operations are guided by the Department of Public Information (DPI), Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) and Department of Field Support (DFS) policy on strategic communications and public information.

4.   A Chief at the D-1 level heads SCS, assisted by 24 staff, comprising 5 international and 19 national staff including 10 national professional officers in Kabul and at six field offices. The Chief of SCS reports directly to the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG). The SCS budget for 2016 and 2017, including staffing costs, was $3.3 and $3.0 million, respectively. In addition, SCS spent $790,493 on outreach activities, publishing, subscriptions and acquisition of strategic communications equipment during the audit period.

5.   Comments provided by UNAMA are incorporated in italics.

II.   AUDIT OBJECTIVE, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

6.   The objective of the audit was to review the adequacy and effectiveness of UNAMA's planning, implementation and monitoring of the strategic communications programme.

7.   This audit was included in the 2018 risk-based work plan of OIOS due to the criticality of the strategic communications programme in supporting UNAMA's mandate.

8.   OIOS conducted this audit from March to August 2018. The audit covered the period from 1 January 2016 to 30 June 2018. Based on an activity-level risk assessment, the audit covered higher and medium risk areas in the strategic communications programme, which included: (a) work planning and risk management; (b) work plan implementation and performance monitoring; and (c) management of SCS.

9.   The audit methodology included: (a) interviews of key personnel, (b) reviews of relevant documentation, (c) analytical reviews of data, and (d) sample testing of media and digital products, internal reports and portfolio of evidence. Visits were made to two field offices located at Kabul and Kunduz.

10.   The audit was conducted in accordance with the International Standards for the Professional Practice of Internal Auditing.

III.   AUDIT RESULTS

A.   Work planning and risk management

<u>SCS needed to strengthen its annual work planning process</u>

11.   DPI/DPKO operational policy and guidance require missions to develop work plans for all strategic communications activities with relative cost estimates. The minimum contents of work plans established in the United Nations planning toolkit include objectives, expected accomplishments, related indicators, outputs, timelines, roles and responsibilities, planning assumptions and risk management measures.

12.   SCS held annual planning retreats in April 2016 and July 2017 to discuss the implementation of strategic objectives and identify priorities, and subsequently prepared its annual work plans. In addition, SCS prepared regional outreach plans for field offices, which included activities, responsibilities, outputs, timelines and required resources. However, the audit noted that the SCS work plans included general descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of Media Relations and Print and Digital Media Units, without indicating specific activities and timelines and did not specify outputs, outcomes and performance indicators for planned activities.

13.   The absence of adequate guidance by the Mission on developing annual work plans contributed to shortcomings in the SCS annual work planning process. Also, SCS believed that its weekly communication planners, shared with section/unit chiefs in the Service, served as annual work plans in a rapidly changing political climate. The audit considers that the weekly planners could not replace annual work plans as they did not include the requisite contents. Also, in the absence of a well-documented component work plan clearly indicating specific activities with measurable time-bound outputs and targets, the implementation of mandated tasks cannot be effectively supervised and monitored. OIOS made similar observations in the audits of the political affairs programme (Report 2017/137) and human rights programme (Report 2018/65) and recommended that UNAMA develops guidance on annual work planning to ensure all substantive programmes include specific, measurable and time-bound targets and outputs in their annual work plans. However, the Mission was yet to develop the requisite guidance. The audit reiterates the need to implement these recommendations.

B.   Work plan implementation and performance monitoring

<u>UNAMA needed to update its communications strategy</u>

14.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to develop communications strategies, which are to be reviewed and updated throughout its lifecycle. The Department of Political Affairs (DPA) policy directive on statements and public comments around elections requires UNAMA to develop sufficient communications strategies in advance of elections.

15.   SCS prepared a communications strategy in October 2016, which included objectives, Mission priorities, operating environment, implementation plans and tools to measure the strategy's effectiveness. However, SCS did not update this strategy in line with the Mission's revised mandates for 2017 and 2018, which emphasized support for the 2018 Afghanistan elections and implementation of the outcomes of the 2017 strategic review, and activities related to electoral support included in the 2017-2020 Mission strategic framework. In addition, the strategy was not revised to reflect UNAMA's decision to close its radio station

(Radio Emrooz) in January 2017 and outsource broadcasting to Afghan radio partners in the regions and increase the use of social media to engage communities. The implementation plans for the strategies of some units such as Media Relations lacked important elements such as key outputs, desired impact and performance indicators. This occurred because the Mission did not regularly review and update its communications strategy due to other competing priorities and late approval of the 2018 mandate. As a result, there was an unmitigated risk that the Mission's strategic communications and public information activities may not adequately and effectively support the implementation of the mandate.

> **(1)** **UNAMA should review and update its 2016 communications strategy in line with the Mission's latest mandate and strategic framework, and outcomes of the strategic review of 2017.**
>
> *UNAMA accepted recommendation 1 and stated that the development of communications strategy was at an advanced stage.* Recommendation 1 remains open pending receipt of the updated strategy.

SCS worked closely with Mission components but needed to regularly review key mission-wide messaging

16.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to ensure that SCS works closely with other mission components to support implementation of mandated priorities and provide guidance on key messaging. UNAMA's communications strategy requires SCS to develop key mission-wide messaging to help substantive sections adhere to consistent core narratives when dealing with interlocutors.

17.   SCS participated in weekly senior management meetings and apprised the participants including the substantive section chiefs, on key developments and media reports on Afghanistan. SCS also coordinated with other Mission components and arranged press releases and briefings for major events in the Mission. SCS staff coordinated with relevant substantive sections in field offices to develop and implement 267 outreach events during the audit period. The audit concluded that SCS worked in an integrated manner with the components to support implementation of mandates.

18.   In addition, SCS coordinated with other sections and prepared a key messaging document in March 2016 on Afghanistan, covering various mandated areas such as elections, the national unity government, regional cooperation, human rights and the peace process. However, due to inadequate attention, SCS did not update this document except for the key messaging on elections prepared in April 2018. Therefore, substantive sections did not have updated and consolidated messages that had been endorsed by the senior Mission leadership to use in communicating with interlocutors. This may result in inconsistent narratives in the Mission's public communications.

> **(2)** **UNAMA should develop and implement a process to regularly review, consolidate and approve concise key messaging on the Mission's priorities for distribution and use by internal stakeholders to ensure consistency in the Mission's core narratives.**
>
> *UNAMA accepted recommendation 2 and acknowledged that the Mission's common messaging document required updating, which will be done by SCS and Political Affairs Service.* Recommendation 2 remains open pending receipt of evidence that a process has been implemented to regularly revise and approve the Mission's key messaging documents.

SCS coordinated with the United Nations Communications Group

19.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to actively participate in the local United Nations Communications Group (UNCG) to ensure information sharing and adherence to a 'One United Nations' approach in strategic communications activities.

20.   SCS participated in UNCG, which was led by the Deputy SRSG and comprised representatives of strategic communications and public information functions from over 20 agencies, funds and programmes and had its own terms of reference and work plan. The objective of UNCG was to strengthen interagency cooperation and coherence in strategic communications under umbrella of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework in Afghanistan. A review of minutes of meetings indicated that UNCG deliberated on common issues such as key United Nations and Afghan events for celebration, capacity development and joint social media campaigns. UNAMA also participated in drafting a long-term strategic document on "Afghanistan – One UN and one Programme 2018-2021", which included various action items such as enhancing digital communications to reach out to a wide range of young Afghans and establishing a website for the whole United Nations family to provide Afghan Government officials with a simple 'one stop' access to the United Nations. OIOS concluded that SCS was adequately coordinating with UNCG.

UNAMA monitored media and reported on key developments in Afghanistan

21.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to establish capacity to monitor both traditional and digital media and issue regular information releases and respond to media queries.

22.   The SCS Media Monitoring Unit monitored selected local and international articles and opinion editorials from both traditional and digital media outlets including government offices and anti-government elements and shared information with all UNAMA staff twice daily. In addition, breaking news and social media updates were shared with management on daily basis. SCS also prepared a weekly media summary and analysis of developments and trends and sent the information to UNAMA management and selected contacts in New York. Monitoring reports covered a range of topics including security, human rights, elections and political developments from major international and local sources.

23.   UNAMA also issued press statements on major incidents such as attacks on civilians, major political developments, natural disasters, publication of Mission reports and celebration of Afghan or United Nations events. Between January 2016 and June 2018, UNAMA issued and posted 170 press releases on its website. A review of 30 major events reported in mass media indicated that press releases were made within 48 hours of occurrence of events. SCS also arranged media background meetings with journalists and maintained logs of media queries; clarified, in coordination with relevant stakeholders, specific issues mentioned in press releases; processed travel requests of journalists on UNAMA flights to cover stories in the regions; and arranged interviews with the Mission leadership. OIOS concluded that UNAMA had implemented adequate media monitoring and reporting mechanisms and promptly reacted to major incidents through press releases and responded to media queries in a timely manner.

SCS leveraged digital communications and emerging technologies

24.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to leverage digital communications and emerging technologies including social media to maximize reach and engagement.

25.   The SCS Print and Digital Media Unit adopted Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Flicker as social media platforms for Mission communications. As of June 2018, the English, Dari and Pashto Facebook accounts had 153,000, 250,000 and 187,000 followers, respectively, which witnessed an increase of 44, 40 and 43 per cent, respectively, from June 2017 figures. UNAMA's Twitter followers grew from 40,000 to 73,000 (82 per cent) in the same period. SCS conducted a weekly analysis of usage of these social media accounts and benchmarked the data with other United Nations missions in its monthly performance report. In June 2018, UNAMA's combined Facebook and Twitter accounts had the largest number of followers compared to other missions. Further, UNAMA Flicker and Instagram included a collection of over 9,000 high resolution pictures showing daily life of Afghans and attractions of Afghanistan. UNAMA also kept its social media accounts updated by posting events and monitored comments by followers. In 2016 and 2017, SCS engaged a consultant to revamp its social media strategy and trained Kabul staff and Mission management in the use of social media. OIOS concluded that UNAMA adequately leveraged digital social media to maximize outreach and engagement of audience.

SCS implemented outreach programmes but needed to strengthen archiving and procurement processes

26.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to use contemporary and appropriate communication approaches including outreach events to engage and maintain dialogue with local, regional and international audiences and build support at grassroots level. The policy also requires UNAMA to ensure public information material is routinely archived throughout the entire life of the Mission. The Procurement Manual requires UNAMA to ensure best value for money and document vendor selection assessments in procurement case files.

27.   In January 2017, SCS discontinued the in-house production and distribution of a weekly 15-minute radio programme and outsourced the production and broadcast of radio and television programmes to local media partners in the regions to engage communities at grassroots level. A review of 50 electronic media outreach programmes indicated that topics of the programmes were consistent with the Mission priority areas such as human rights, women, peace and security and youth issues. The regional public information officers prepared outreach programme proposals and estimated budgets for planned programmes which were approved by the Chief of SCS. The regional offices reported implementation of the outreach programmes to SCS showing details of the activities including gender-disaggregated data of participants along with photos and stories published in the Facebook account and UNAMA website. The audit concluded that SCS planned and implemented outreach programmes to support the peace process through engaging local communities.

28.   During the audit period, SCS procured 267 media and other outreach activities amounting to $151,710, $144,000 and $78,286, in 2016, 2017 and up to 30 June 2018 respectively. These were procured directly from media partners as the individual costs of items were within the prevailing low-value procurement threshold. A review of a sample of 45 project proposals for three provinces indicated that SCS partnered with 11 out of the 43 media partners included in media mapping documents, without documenting price quotations or other criteria used for selection of partners. Therefore, there was no assurance that all capable potential media partners were considered and provided a fair chance to participate in producing and broadcasting outreach programmes. In addition, the cost of production, broadcasting and rebroadcasting also varied up to 75 per cent during 2016 and 2017 but explanations were not adequately documented to justify the variations. Also, there was no evidence that the Chief of SCS or any of the public information officers involved in acquisition process had received adequate training on procurement.

29.   SCS stated that media partners were identified through expert knowledge of the media houses and political landscape that was possessed by the Mission, although this was not adequately documented. SCS also stated that many media stations could not reasonably or ethically be considered for competition due to

factors related to unsuitability of the entities to work with. However, there was no evidence of how these issues were analyzed to select media partners.

30.   The above occurred due to lack of requisite guidance and trainings on the procurement process and impacted transparency of selection of media partners and ensuring best value for money. In addition, SCS did not consistently archive television and radio programmes procured from local media partners despite obligation of the media partners to provide the Mission with two compact disk copies of each programme. A review of sampled outreach programmes at a regional office indicated that instead of archiving all broadcast outreach programmes, compact disks for only 3 out of 53 programmes were available in the office. This was due to inadequate attention of regional public information officers to collect and archive media programmes. As a result, the Mission did not have a complete repository of strategic communications programmes for future reference.

> **(3) UNAMA should provide requisite training to staff in the Strategic Communications Service to: (i) ensure that the selection of media partners for outreach programmes is based on a competitive and transparent process that is adequately documented in procurement or similar case files; and (ii) guide public information officers to systematically archive media outreach programmes.**
>
> *UNAMA accepted recommendation 3 and stated that training would be provided at the earliest opportunity.* Recommendation 3 remains open pending receipt of evidence that requisite training has been provided to staff.

UNAMA needed to consider redeploying resources to comprehensively evaluate the impact of its strategic communications programme

31.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to qualitatively and quantitatively evaluate strategic communications programmes and products on a regular basis to ensure that communications objectives are met in the most efficient manner. The United Nations regulations and rules governing programme planning (ST/SGB/2016/6) requires UNAMA to conduct internal and external evaluations of programmes to systematically and objectively assess their relevance, effectiveness, efficiency and impact. The United Nations Secretary-General's management reforms of 2017 also emphasize this.

32.   SCS engaged external consulting firms to conduct public opinion polls of UNAMA in 2016 and 2017. The aim of the opinion polls was to obtain trend analyses and develop an understanding of public perceptions of UNAMA as per the recommendation of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations. Results of the opinion polls were communicated to substantive sections in the Mission to assist them in programmatic decisions. However, SCS had not conducted an internal or external evaluation to determine the qualitative and quantitative impact of its programmes and products. UNAMA stated that a good deal of resources was currently being expended on evaluating and reviewing the impact and effectiveness of communication activities and products and the Mission was unwilling to allocate additional resources for this purpose. UNAMA did not produce any reports to indicate that SCS had undergone a comprehensive evaluation exercise. Nevertheless, considering the Mission's comments and the recent surveys conducted, OIOS did not make a recommendation on this issue but urges UNAMA to redeploy resources to comprehensively evaluate the strategic communications programme.

C.   Management of the Strategic Communications Service

<u>UNAMA initiated action to further improve gender parity in SCS</u>

33.   Security Council resolutions and the policy on gender equality in United Nations peacekeeping operations require UNAMA to expand the role and contribution of women in United Nations field-based operations through appropriate recruitment and retention strategies. Further, the policy on strategic communications and public information requires recruitment of national staff and liaison officers, particularly women, from the outset, who are key to understanding and communicating effectively with local audiences.

34.   As of 30 June 2018, SCS staff included 7 females including 2 administrative assistants out of 18 positions, and all public information officers at six field offices were males. This occurred due to safety and security conditions in the regions and the culture in Afghanistan, which discouraged their employment. To address this challenge, the Mission was consulting with United Nations Headquarters on how to increase opportunities for Afghan women in the work force and advocating within the country for gradual change in attitudes. This issue was also included in audit of human rights programme in UNAMA (Report 2018/65) and the Mission was taking measures to address the issue. Therefore, OIOS did not make any recommendation in this regard as the Mission was already taking action to further improve gender parity.

<u>A significant number of SCS staff had completed mandatory trainings</u>

35.   The DPI/DPKO/DFS policy on strategic communications and public information requires UNAMA to develop ongoing training for staff whose work entails strategic communications activities to equip them with appropriate tools to address audiences on both traditional and digital platforms. Also, the Secretary-General's bulletin of November 2016 on mandatory learning programme (ST/SGB/2016/12) requires staff to complete all the mandatory training courses.

36.   The staff of SCS participated in the annual DPA seminars for public information officers, and in-house training courses on use of social media. Also, staff had accomplished 80 per cent of the mandatory training as of June 2018. OIOS acknowledges this significant achievement and stresses the need for SCS staff to complete all the mandatory training courses.

IV.   ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

37.   OIOS wishes to express its appreciation to the management and staff of UNAMA for the assistance and cooperation extended to the auditors during this assignment.

(*Signed*) Eleanor T. Burns
Director, Internal Audit Division
Office of Internal Oversight Services

STATUS OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Audit of the strategic communications programme in the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical[1]/ Important[2]	C/ O[3]	Actions needed to close recommendation	Implementation date[4]
1	UNAMA should review and update its 2016 communications strategy in line with the Mission's latest mandate and strategic framework, and outcomes of the strategic review of 2017	Important	O	Submission of the updated communications strategy.	01 November 2018
2	UNAMA should develop and implement a process to regularly review, consolidate and approve concise key messaging on the Mission's priorities for distribution and use by internal stakeholders to ensure consistency in the Mission's core narratives	Important	O	Submission of evidence that a process has been implemented to regularly revise and approve the Mission's key messaging documents.	01 January 2019
3	UNAMA should provide requisite training to staff in the Strategic Communications Service to: (i) ensure that the selection of media partners for outreach programmes is based on a competitive and transparent process that is adequately documented in procurement or similar case files; and (ii) guide public information officers to systematically archive media outreach programmes.	Important	O	Submission of evidence that SCS staff have been trained on selection of media partners and archiving.	01 March 2019

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[1] Critical recommendations address critical and/or pervasive deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided with regard to the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

[2] Important recommendations address important (but not critical or pervasive) deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

[3] C = closed, O = open

[4] Date provided by UNAMI in response to recommendations.

APPENDIX I

Management Response

Management Response

Audit of strategic communication programme in United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

Rec. no.	Recommendation	Critical[1]/ Important[2]	Accepted? (Yes/No)	Title of responsible individual	Implementation date	Client comments
1	UNAMA should review and update its 2016 communications strategy in line with the Mission's latest mandate and strategic framework, and outcomes of the strategic review of 2017	Important	Yes	Chief, Strategic Communications Services (SCS)	01 / 11 / 2018	This is well advanced
2	UNAMA should develop and implement a process to regularly review, consolidate and approve concise key messaging on the Mission's priorities for distribution and use by internal stakeholders to ensure consistency in the Mission's core narratives.	Important	Yes	Chief, Strategic Communications Chief, Political Affairs Services (PAS)	01 / 01 / 2019	The Mission's common messaging document does require updating and will done by SCS and PAS.
3	UNAMA should provide requisite training to staff in the Strategic Communications Service to: (i) ensure that the selection of media partners for outreach programmes is based on a competitive and transparent process that is adequately documented in procurement or similar case files; and (ii) guide public information officers to systematically archive media outreach programmes.	Important	Yes	Chief Mission Support (CMS)	01 / 03 / 2019	Training will be conducted at earliest opportunity

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[1] Critical recommendations address critical and/or pervasive deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance cannot be provided with regard to the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.

[2] Important recommendations address important (but not critical or pervasive) deficiencies in governance, risk management or control processes, such that reasonable assurance may be at risk regarding the achievement of control and/or business objectives under review.