

NEAT Philippines Working Report
Strategic Communication Lessons from the COVID-19 Pandemic: ASEAN Plus Three Countries (APT)
Experiences, Best Practices, and Ways Forward
July 12, 2022, 13:00-16:50 H (Manila Time, GMT +8)
Via Zoom

Background

Strategic communication encompasses activities of various disciplines including public relations, management communication, and advertising. It has been increasingly recognized as a growing communication subfield that analyses the capacity of organizations for engaging in purposeful communication. The strength of the approach is its emphasis on strategy rather than on specific tactics as well as its focus on communications understood holistically¹.

An effective communication strategy is a two-way process that involves clear messages, delivered via appropriate platforms, tailored for diverse audiences, and shared by trusted people. Thus, incomplete and delayed information can sow public confusion and fear; how late and conflicting messages can instigate uncertainty that could lead to costly mistakes; how vague and fragmented information can create inefficiencies and open opportunities for corruption; and how policy shifts and retractions can cause public confusion and breed mistrust in governance².

Hence, several countries of the APT have successfully reduced their COVID-19 infection rate early, while others continue to be overwhelmed. The reasons for the differences are complex, but response efficacy has in part depended on the speed and scale of governmental intervention and how communities have perceived, received, and acted on the information provided by governments and other agencies³. Clear, engaging, and actionable communication has proven critical in the face of pandemic crisis management and will remain essential during the recovery and reentry to “normal” life. Furthermore, responsive, coordinated, and collaborative communication is crucial because it can harness human and organizational efforts to combat the pandemic, establish trust, and minimize the pandemic’s negative consequences^{4 5}.

Therefore, it is especially important to explore the different strategic communication strategies of each APT country during the COVID-19 pandemic and identify the best practices. The absence of a strategic communication mechanism, especially during crises in the region, is worth noting. Therefore, the objectives of this working group are as follows:

- Revisit the strategic communication responses of the APT countries during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighting the role of the government;
- Point out culture- and values-sensitive communication strategies internal to each APT country;

¹ Kjerstin Thorson, “Strategic Communication”. *Oxford Bibliographies*. (2018)
<https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo9780199756841/obo9780199756841.xml#:text=Defines%20strategic%20communication%20as%20E2%80%9Cthe,management%20and%20decision%20making%20power>

² Shiela Siar, “Crisis and Risk Communication: What We Can Learn from the COVID-19 Pandemic. Philippine Institute for Development Studies (2022):file:///C:/Users/pidsadmin/Downloads/9_Siar_Crisis%20communication_paper_edited_final.pdf (upon request)

³ Bernadette Hyland-Wood, “Toward effective government communication strategies in the era of Covid-19. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8, Article Number 30. (2021): <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-020-00701-w>

⁴ Asian Development Bank, Covid-19 Risk Communications Promising Practices Playbook. (Mandaluyong City, Philippines, 2021)

⁵ Cheryl Ruth Soriano, “Setting Up a Health Communication Strategy for Local Government Units During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Insights and Recommendations”. *DLSU-JRIG Policy Brief Volume 1, Issue 3* (April 2020):<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/58ff0e1fa5790aa37e3fa35a/t/5e8d0d35255ac622938fa8a2/1586302264133/JRIG+Policy+Brief+Volume+1+Issue+3.pdf>

- Assess and update existing APT instruments related to strategic communication in times of crisis, especially the cross-border cases;
- Identify the challenges faced by governments and the region pertaining to strategic communication; and
- Recommend best practices that could be used by the region not only with the COVID-19 crisis but also for future crises and disruptions.

Working Group Meeting

Twenty-one (21) participants from 11 APT countries attended the Working Group meeting. Each expert presented their views in line with the WG objectives identified above. They highlighted the crucial role of strategic communication in crisis response and the way strategies are communicated affects the responses of each stakeholder to policies. Thus, they highlighted the need to ensure that the communication channels are transparent and timely; actively address falsehoods and fake news, and empower the stakeholders. It is equally important that leaders are able to set a good example to their constituents to ensure that the reaction to policy is positive.

One of the trends in the discussions of the experts is the need to strengthen crisis and surveillance systems to prepare for emergency situations. For example:

- Laos demonstrated that successes stem from past investments to strengthen surveillance systems and result in functional early warning systems.
- Vietnam emphasized that proactive prevention is needed as well as, a high-flexibility strategy in order to respond strategically during a crisis. Along with investments in functioning systems, greater stakeholder collaboration among the various actors is needed.
- Cambodia recommends investing in preparedness and response at the national and sub-national level through multi-sectoral collaboration among various sectors and communities, families, and individuals.
- Korea underscored the importance of APT cooperation as the biggest partner for supply chain, investments, human exchanges, and trade.
- Japan highlighted the role of experts in risk communication to ensure transparency and candidness of government to secure public understanding.
- The Philippines emphasized the need to ensure coherence of messages from the top administration and government departments, national and local governments as well as, the institutionalization of fact-checking and awareness, risk communication, and crisis communication. However, for systems and partnerships to be well received by the constituents, it is important to ensure that communication is sensitive to the values and cultures of people.
- China demonstrated that social support such as informational support can positively impact individuals and regulate their negative emotional status. Indonesia emphasized that a media campaign alone is not enough to engage the public in times of a crisis.
- Malaysia's findings show that behaviors and attitudes towards COVID-19 practices are related to cultural norms.
- Lastly, Singapore showed that information can be disseminated properly through differentiated communication mediums and communication strategies that are culture- and value-sensitive.

Furthermore, this report will highlight the policy recommendations and ways forward gathered from the experts' presentations leveraging the use of strategic communication in crisis response. The discussions are divided into three parts: (1) strengthening collaboration between the government and its stakeholders through communication crisis response; (2) promotion of the utilization of regional networks and deeper cooperation among APT countries; and (3) transparent and effective communication systems.

Policy Recommendation (1): Strengthening Collaboration Between the Government itself and its Stakeholder in Communication Crisis Response

Strengthened collaboration and stakeholder engagement between the government with relevant actors in order to improve communication in crisis response was identified by most experts to be one of the ways forward. They emphasized the need for partnerships among national and local governments with the experts, response teams, non-state actors, civil society, and most especially with the constituents in order to effectively address the crisis.

Moreover, given that there are varying levels of knowledge on crisis and risk communications, capacity building was also strongly recommended in order to equip both the government and other actors with relevant skills to effectively communicate information because public engagement is important to consolidate concerns and reduce oversight in policymaking. Hence, here is the summary of recommendations and ways forward from the experts related to the policy recommendation (1):

For collaboration within the government as official manager of the crisis:

- Improve close collaboration at the national and subnational level for information sharing and response decision-making to prevent inconsistencies in messages;
- Organize government's risk communications to support public understanding and satisfaction⁶; and
- Strengthen the capacity of disaster risk reduction and management teams and information officers through the institutionalization of fact-checking and awareness and skills training in schools, government, and private sector offices, and local communities; conducting trainings on risk communication and crisis communication across government agencies and local governments; and partnering with media organizations, academic institutions, civil society organizations, and youth groups.

For engaging the stakeholders:

- Establish channels to collect and consolidate public issues solicited from individuals and the private sector;
- Empower local communities and vulnerable sectors through learnings gleaned from the COVID-19 response; and
- Engage experts in responding to crises and emergencies to increase message exposure as well as ensure the credibility and accountability of information.

Policy Recommendation (2): Promotion of Utilization of Regional Networks and Deeper Cooperation Among APT countries

At the regional level, there is a need to harmonize existing communication channels to ensure better communication flow among APT countries which could facilitate knowledge transfers and ensure a more cohesive response to a crisis. The lack of streamlined and standardized channels has resulted in APT countries communicating bilaterally. ASEAN member states can expand existing plans to cover Plus Three members, such as the ASEAN Communication Master Plan and the ASEAN Strategic Framework for Public Health Emergencies.

The experts also focused on strategies to promote regional networks and partnerships among APT countries such as strengthening multisectoral and global responses to emerging crises; maximizing the potential of the intra-APT market and broader economic integration; and improving coordination

⁶ It is important to organize and ensure proper organization of risk communications in order to effectively disseminate information to the public. Convinced citizens will possess the sense of ownership of enforced policies.

between WHO and EOC Networks in order to function as a highly integrated regional platform alongside the WHO during a pandemic.

The need to strengthen coordination is further emphasized, as ASEAN countries have turned to external partners for medical and economic assistance. Thus, better coordination would ensure assistance is allocated and delivered more efficiently.

They also recommended establishing a standard framework for communication flows outlining protocols and guidelines to be followed particularly in government risk communication and developing crisis management protocols that may be incorporated in Public Service Continuity Plans.

They emphasized the use of both traditional and digital tools to ensure that communication is inclusive. Several experts have sought to assess the effectiveness of social communication and response to the pandemic. Countries have leveraged the use of digital technology to disseminate information through public access dashboards to ensure that factual and official information were highlighted therefore should be included in the regional mechanism.

Policy Recommendation (3): Creating Transparent and Effective Communication Systems

The experts also highlighted the importance of transparent and effective communication systems. Hence, they recommended the following:

On addressing misinformation, disinformation, and fake news:

- Ensure that information disseminated by central and local governments to the public is clear and transparent;
- Provide candid and detailed explanations of facts and data as well as, the decision-making process leading to a better understanding of the public of policies adopted by the government;
- Address false information by providing timely, transparent, and clear updates from official sources;

On establishing communication systems that leverage digital technologies as well as maintain traditional sources of information:

- Accelerate inclusive digital transformation of communication channels but also adopt different communication channels such as websites, social media, e-letters, etc.;
- Integrate surveillance in new technologies to facilitate data entry for real-time monitoring dashboards at both the national and subnational levels;
- Strengthen event-based surveillance in local communities through hotline and media reporting;
- Maintain legacy media to ensure information is disseminated in rural and traditional areas; and
- Invest in surveillance systems that are indicator-based and event-based to serve as early warning systems.

Conclusion

The APT as a region and each country experienced difficulty in strategic communication. Each stage of the pandemic presented unique challenges that require different techniques. Hence, the recommendations presented above may be taken into consideration not only for the COVID-19 pandemic response but also for preparing and responding to future disruptions and crises. Hence, this working group **recommends for each APT country improve its collaboration within its system [internal processes of each government], its stakeholders, and neighboring countries.** Though crisis response requires a sense of urgency, it is also important to take into consideration how the information flows, how it will be taken effectively, and how to combat mis- and dis-information. Hence, this requires **crafting and/or strengthening strategic communication systems for crisis including all the lessons learned from the pandemic.**

In summary, the working group experts affirmed the important role of strategic communication in crisis management as it affects how the stakeholders receive, process, and respond to policies, especially at the time of crisis when urgency, digestible facts, and coordination within the government as the official manager of the crisis are in the utmost importance. Most APT countries have shared experiences in navigating strategic communication throughout the pandemic such as the utilization of digital media platforms.

However, this does not come without any tradeoff such as the rise of misinformation and fake news. Numerous APT countries also have value- and culture- sensitive approaches such as the use of other traditional methods in reaching and engaging other stakeholders in a more tailored manner. Others utilized digital adaptation such as the use of creative posters, infographics, influencers, and others for wider reach and to uplift the spirits of the people. Some used other methods such as traditional media where the trust is high. Some used sector-specific approaches such as in reaching persons with disabilities, far-flung areas, and elderlies. During the different stages of the pandemic, each APT country experienced different challenges and used different methods of strategic communication.

Logistical Summary

The following logistical documents are attached in the appendix:

- a. Group Photo
- b. Final Program
- c. List of Bionotes

Group Photo



Final Program

Time	Activity	Speaker
12:00-12:45 H	Technical dry run	
13:00-13:10 H	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Working Group Background ● Participants ● Group Photo 	Ms. Abigail E. Andrada Host of the WG Meeting Research Analyst, Philippine Institute for Development Studies (Confirmed)
13:10-13:20 H	Welcoming Remarks	Dr. Aniceto C. Orbeta, Jr. Country Coordinator, NEAT Philippines President, Philippine Institute for Development Studies (Confirmed)
Session 1: Insights and Experiences of APT Countries Moderator: Dr. Joefe Santarita (Confirmed) NEAT Philippines Member, University of the Philippines Asian Center		
13:20-13:35 H	NEAT Cambodia	H.E Dr. Ly Sovann Director, Communicable Disease Committee Dr. Teng Srey Deputy Director, Communicable Disease Committee Dr. Theme Viravann Deputy Director, Communicable Disease Committee
13:35-13:50 H	NEAT China	Dr. Zhang Di Professor, School of Journalism and Communication Renmin University of China
13:50-14:05 H	NEAT Laos	Dr. Dr. Bouaphanh Khamphongphane Deputy Director National Center for Laboratory and Epidemiology (NCLE)
14:05-14:20 H	NEAT Indonesia	Dr. Umami Salamah Director, Institute for Social and Political Research and Development (LPPSP), Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia

14:20-14:35 H	NEAT Korea	Dr. Lee Yo-Han Research Professor, Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies(KIAS), Busan University of Foreign Studies
14:35-14:50 H	Session 1: Q&A/ Discussion	
14:50-15:00 H	Health Break	
Session 2: Insights and Experiences of APT Countries Moderator: Mr. Jovito Jose P. Katigbak NEAT Philippines Member, Foreign Service Institute (Confirmed)		
15:00-15:15 H	NEAT Malaysia	Dr. Anis Azlan Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Research in Media and Communication National University of Malaysia
15:15- 15:30 H	NEAT Philippines	Dr. Sheila V. Siar Department Manager III, Research Information Department, Philippine Institute for Development Studies
15:30-15:45 H	NEAT Singapore	Ms. Chen Juan Research Assistant of the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore
15:45-16:00 H	NEAT Vietnam	Dr. Le Trung Kien Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs
16:00-16:15 H	NEAT Japan	Dr. Ono Taichi Director, Healthcare Policy Concentration, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies
16:15-16:35 H	Session 2: Q&A/Discussion	
16:35-16:50 H	Wrap Up, Reminders, and Closing Remarks	Dr. Francis Mark A. Quimba (Confirmed) Senior Research Fellow, Philippine Institute for Development Studies

List of Bionotes

Session 1 Moderator:

- **Dr. Joefe B. Santarita** is Professor and former Dean of the University of the Philippines' Asian Center (UPAC). He also serves as the Chairperson of the UP Tri-College Ph.D. Philippine Studies Program and is a faculty affiliate of the UP Open University ASEAN Graduate Studies Program. Furthermore, he sits in the Editorial Board of the Asian Studies Journal, and Diliman Gender Review and currently serves as Associate Editor of the Plaridel Journal. Dr. Santarita has

completed his doctoral degree in South Asian Studies from the National University of Singapore, his master's degree in Asian Studies at the UPAC and his bachelor's degree in History and Community Development from UP Visayas. His research interests and publications focus on Indian Studies, Migration Studies, Philippine Culture and Society, Maritime History, blue economy, and ASEAN Studies. Moreover, Dr. Santarita was recipient of several awards and grants such as the Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence Program, German Academic Exchange Service, Southwest Pacific Dialogue Art and Culture Scholarship and Japan-ASEAN Youth Fellowship among others. He also received several awards including the University's highest distinction for exemplary performance in teaching in 2019.

Session 1 Presenters

1. H.E Dr. Ly Sovann, Director, Communicable Disease Committee, Cambodia

Dr. Ly Sovann is currently the Director of the Communicable Disease Control Department of Ministry of Health (MOH) in Cambodia and has served as MOH Spokesperson on issues related to communicable outbreak and response. His expertise in disease surveillance goes back to 1995, and he has since been the Head of the Communicable Disease Surveillance system and the Coordinator of SARS Control in Cambodia, as well as the Chief of the Disaster Unit at MOH. Dr. Sovann has conducted research on many national and international projects, including a study on aspirin abuse in coordination with the Khon Kaen University in Thailand; a prevalence study on Leptospirosis; and outbreak investigations for diseases such as cholera, ARI, SARS, and avian influenza. Dr. Sovann is a Medical Doctor graduated from the University of Health Science in Phnom Penh in 1994 and received Master of Clinical Tropical Medicine and a Diploma of Tropical Medicine from Mahidol University in 2000 and 2001 respectively.

2. Dr. Zhang Di, Professor, School of Journalism and Communication, Renmin University of China

Zhang Di is a professor at School of Journalism and Communication, Renmin University of China. His research interests include strategic communication, public relations, health communication, and international communication. Before joining in Renmin University of China in 2010, he worked as a reporter at English Channel of China Central Television and China Daily. Title of the presentation: Emotional and Informational Support during the Outbreak of COVID-19 in China

3. Dr. Bouaphanh Khamphongphane, Deputy Director of National Center for Laboratory and Epidemiology (NCLE). Ministry of Public Health, Lao PDR

Dr. Khamphongphane is the Deputy Director of the National Centre for Laboratory and Epidemiology in the Lao People's Democratic Republic. She is also a supervisor of the Laos Field Epidemiology Training program and the ASEAN-Australia Health Security Fellowship. During the early days of COVID-19 outbreak, she supervised rapid response teams in provinces to look for suspect cases and worked closely with WHO to conduct COVID-19 testing.

4. Dr. Umami Salamah, Director, Institute for Social and Political Research and Development (LPPSP), Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Indonesia

Umami Salamah is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Communication Science, Universitas Indonesia. Her research interest is on media, public sector communication,

corporate communication, political communication and branding. She graduated from the Faculty of Psychology and then pursued her master and doctoral degree in Communication, all from Universitas Indonesia. She is the Director for Communication Research Centre (2018 - now) and starting from Feb 2022 is also the Director of Institute for Social and Political Research and Development at Universitas Indonesia. At the end of 2021, Ummi led a publicly-funded research on public communication effectiveness in times of COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Dr. Lee Yo-Han, Research Professor, Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies (KIAS), Busan University of Foreign Studies

Dr. Lee is a Research Professor at the Korea Institute for ASEAN Studies, Busan University of Foreign University, Busan, Korea and a Visiting Researcher, at the Southeast Asian Center, Hankuk University of Foreign University, Seoul, Korea. His research interests are in Southeast Asian Area Studies, Regional Cooperation in ASEAN, Lao Area Studies, Korean Studies in Laos, Mekong River Basin Area Studies, Political Studies in Southeast Asia, Development Assistance in Southeast Asia. He acquired his Ph.D. in International Relations, Master of Science in Politics, and Bachelor of Science in Economics at the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul, Korea.

Session 2 Moderator:

- **Mr. Jovito Jose Katigbak** is a Foreign Affairs Research Specialist (FARS) II at the Center for International Relations and Strategic Studies (CIRSS) of the Philippine Foreign Service Institute (FSI). He undertakes policy-oriented research and analysis on trade and development-related matters, under the International Trade and Economics section. Mr. Katigbak has published articles on ASEAN integration, Philippine trade policy, internet economy, and sustainable development. Mr. Katigbak has a degree on Master of Arts in Development Policy from De La Salle University. He graduated Magna Cum Laude in the Consular and Diplomatic Affairs Program of the De La Salle – College of Saint Benilde (DLS-CSB). He has participated in various local and international conferences and seminars focusing on international relations and development. Mr. Katigbak is also a part-time faculty member of De La Salle University – Manila (Political Science and Development Studies Department) and Far Eastern University – Manila (International Studies Department).

Session 2 Presenters

1. Dr. Anis Azlan, Senior Lecturer in the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, National University of Malaysia

Dr. Arina Anis Azlan is a senior lecturer at the Centre for Research in Media and Communication, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Deputy Director at the UKM x UNICEF Communication for Development Centre in Health (HEALTHCOMM) at the same university. Her general areas of interest include health communication, communication behaviour and information management. The research projects she is currently involved in include preventing malaria among at-risk communities in Peninsular Malaysia, developing health literacy and e-health literacy instruments for the Malaysian population and various COVID-19 projects researching its impacts on different groups in Malaysia.

2. Dr. Sheila V. Siar, Department Manager III, Research Information Department, Philippine Institute for Development Studies

Sheila V. Siar leads the knowledge dissemination program of the Philippine Institute for Development Studies. She has a PhD in Development Studies from the University of Auckland (New Zealand), a Master of Arts in Public Administration from the International Christian University (Japan), and a Bachelor of Science in Development Communication from the University of the Philippines. She has published on skilled migration and knowledge exchange, transnationalism and diaspora, social remittances, regional integration, crisis and risk communication, and e-governance. Before joining PIDS, she worked at several international organizations, including the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, International Rice Research Institute, and International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management.

3. Ms. Chen Juan, Ms. Jing Yee Chua, Mr. Ryan Ho Qix, Research Assistant, East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore

- Ms. CHUA Jing Yee is a Research Assistant at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. She received her Bachelor of Social Science (Hons) in Economics from the National University of Singapore. Her main research interests are development economics, international economics, and policy research.
- Ms. CHEN Juan is a Research Assistant at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. She graduated with a Bachelor of Laws in International Politics from Peking University, China. Her research interests include state–market relations, mass political behaviour and contemporary Chinese politics.
- Mr. Ryan HO Qixu is a Research Assistant at the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (with Honours) from the Faculty of Arts and Social Science (Department of History), National University of Singapore in 2017, and a Master of Science (Asian Studies) from Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University in 2020. Since joining EAI in 2017, he has been tracing Taiwan’s constitutional reforms, the status of Uighur and Hui Muslims, and Islamophobia in China. He has recently contributed two co-authored papers in Chineseness and Modernity in a Changing China: Essays in Honour of Professor Wang Gungwu (Singapore: World Scientific, 2020).

4. Dr. Le Trung Kien, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Dr. Le Trung Kien is the Assistant Director-General, Director of Center for Development and Security Studies, Institute for Foreign Policy and Strategic Studies, Diplomatic Academy of Viet Nam (DAV). Dr. Kien is also the coordinator of the Mekong Center of the DAV. His research covers multilateral cooperation in the Mekong subregion, water security, cyber security, US-China relations, Viet Nam’s foreign policy and the international economy. He has served 16 years at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was a Director of International Economic Cooperation Frameworks and Fora Division, Department of Economic Affairs and a Consul at the Consulate General of SR of Viet Nam in Shanghai, China. He held a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations from the DAV in 2006, a Master of Public Policy from Australian National University in 2010, and Ph.D. in International Relations from DAV in 2021.

5. Dr. Ono Taichi, Director, Healthcare Policy Concentration, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies

Taichi ONO, Ph.D. (Economics, Osaka City University), Professor and Director of Health Policy Course, National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), Tokyo Japan. Before becoming tenured professor of GRIPS in 2020, he has worked as a senior official at the Ministry of Health and Welfare. He has assumed various positions including Director-level positions at Health Policy Bureau , Health Insurance Bureau as well as Equal Employment, Children and Family Welfare Bureau. In 2022, he published a book titled as “Formulation of Social Security in Post WWII Japan? Advisory Council on Social Security and its Expert Members” from University of Tokyo Press.