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**Under-Secretary-General Melissa Fleming  
Statement to the Committee on Information  
Wednesday 2 September 2020  
10:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.**

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Allow me to say what a privilege it is to have you preside over this meeting, my own first opportunity to meet, hear and speak in formal session to the Committee on Information. You have been a constant source of support and guidance for the work of our Department, particularly in these crisis times. My greetings also to the other members of the Bureau and of the Committee, many of whom I have been fortunate to meet bilaterally or at our informal brainstorming session.

I should also like to pay tribute to my predecessor, Alison Smale, for her leadership of the Department of Global Communications during the last two sessions of the Committee.

Mr. Chair,

Speaking at the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly 10 years ago, His Majesty King Mohammed VI of Morocco spoke of the need “to be prepared to meet new challenges. We should do this through collective action to strengthen the foundations of a global, harmonious, solidarity-based system to promote sustainable human development in which efficient, equitable governance should play a key role, so that we may offer future generations a dignified life and build a future of peace, stability, progress and prosperity for all.”

The year we are living in has dramatized the wisdom of His Majesty’s counsel. The COVID-19 pandemic has irreversibly changed our world and it has upended our lives, exposing existing fault lines of injustice, socio-economic inequalities, fear and, in my field, has driven a viral misinformation flow.

As part of the United Nations response to the crisis, the Department of Global Communications – I’m proud to say -- was able to rapidly pivot to providing programmes on virtual platforms and put into action the new Global Communications Strategy for the United Nations, which frames our communications as audience-focused, data-driven, and oriented towards promoting public engagement with, and solutions to, the world’s biggest challenges.

Even before the pandemic was declared, the Department was convening and co-chairing, with the World Health Organization, the UN Communications Group Crisis Team on COVID-19, bringing together communicators from across the UN system. Meeting weekly, and coordinating closely with DGC's strategic communications planning team, the group discusses the most pressing issues related to the pandemic and also shares a daily email with the latest information on the UN response efforts, and develops and regularly updates messaging -- including for the Secretary-General's policy briefs -- that has enabled the UN system to speak in one voice globally.

Planning grids help colleagues to set daily and weekly priorities for content-gathering and dissemination and ensure UN system report releases and events are scheduled at appropriate times to allow for effective promotional strategies.

A dedicated COVID-19 web portal was created and launched by the Department in March. It highlights news and information from across the UN system, as well as messages and priorities of the Secretary-General. The multilingual portal has proved to be an important public resource, receiving over 4 million pageviews in less than six months.

Our multimedia content tackled misinformation by providing facts and science, and highlighting stories of solidarity from around the world, with many drawn from the Department's network of UN Information Centres. In response, audience figures skyrocketed. We saw exponential increases in followers, users, page views and engagement on social media, UN News, and other platforms. External media used our materials and packages, such as UNifeed, the UN platform for sharing broadcast-quality video content, at higher rates than ever before.

We also sought to develop new partnerships in different regions and languages for the content. UN News audio stories were introduced to podcast platforms and major partners were acquired in East Africa, for example, for our Kiswahili content. Our Africa Renewal team also shifted its editorial focus to the pandemic, including by spotlighting the efforts of the continent's health-care workers. Our UN podcast, *Awake at Night*, which I host, features weekly in-depth interviews with UN humanitarian staff at the frontlines of our response.

The global network of 59 UNICs tailored their approaches to COVID communications to take account of local audiences' preferences. Whether through videos in Georgia, murals in Senegal, sign language in India, community radio in Colombia, posters in South Africa and Zambia, or social media in Lebanon, the UNICs chose media and platforms that enabled them to reach audiences that would otherwise not receive such content. The integration of UNICs with Resident Coordinator Offices provided opportunities to widen and deepen the impact of UN messaging at the local level with key constituencies.

Outreach partners such as the Secretary-General's Messengers of Peace were another way in which DGC engaged the public worldwide on the UN's response to COVID-19. For the first time all current Messengers of Peace issued a joint statement, supporting the Secretary-General's global ceasefire appeal, which also received support from more than 180 Member States.

The UN Academic Impact initiative looked at the pandemic's impact through podcasts, webinars and feature articles highlighting the importance of the exercise of "intellectual social responsibility" at this time. The Dag Hammarskjöld Library launched an online 'Frequently Asked Questions' feature on the UN's COVID-19 response, which was viewed over 17,500 times, while a new chat feature for real-time research assistance was accessed more than 4,000 times. The Office for the Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth, in partnership with the World Health Organization and UNICEF, held a series of 11 webinars for young people called "#CopingWithCOVID".

For internal communications, the iSeek team, with OICT support, expanded remote access to UN system staff worldwide and established dedicated resource pages on policies and information related to the pandemic. It also launched a series of online information sessions known as "iSeek Live" that were collectively viewed by some 50,000 staff worldwide. And, just this morning, we launched an updated version of DeleGATE, the UN Intranet-iSeek for Member States, in response to a request from the Committee on Information.

Distinguished delegates,

A central feature of the Department's COVID-19 efforts has been Verified, a new UN initiative in collaboration with Purpose, a social mobilization organization. Our UN accounts share compelling trusted, science-based content about the pandemic and have engaged 18,000 information volunteers to further share our stories and messages with their peers and networks. This has become especially important at a time when so much harmful misinformation and disinformation is being shared, especially on social media, about COVID-19. Since launching in May, the initiative has already reached an estimated 400 million people with UN-verified content in multiple languages across the world.

The Verified team is also working with partners in different countries to produce content in local languages that can be shared with influencers that target specific groups such as youth. One example is India, where content is being created in 22 languages.

The initiative is also backed by the local knowledge and distribution power of UNICs. The UNIC in Rio de Janeiro, for example, arranged for the names of victims of COVID-19 to be projected on the city's iconic Christ the Redeemer statue, helping to generate solidarity and compassion essential workers and victims. Some 87,000 people watched the projections live on YouTube and more than 300 international and national media outlets produced stories about the event, also offering sound health guidance.

The importance of providing trusted content cannot be overstated. The Department conducted a civil society survey about misinformation in seven languages that found that 60 per cent of respondents reported that the UN was one of their top three sources of authoritative information about the pandemic.

Mr. Chair,

COVID-19 has obviously impacted the way we work, with in-person meetings curtailed and new ways needed to ensure that the UN continues to engage with people worldwide. To that end, the Non-Governmental Liaison Service enabled the virtual participation of civil society representatives in UN high-level meetings and multi-stakeholder hearings on issues ranging from gender equality to the state of the world's oceans to tackling hunger.

We have also been doing things differently, editorially and technically. For example: we're now producing meetings coverage press releases from remote locations, using IT to collaborate and to follow proceedings. We are live-streaming video coverage on social media. We will soon roll out several new cloud-based technologies: a full-service Digital Asset Management System for photos; and a video platform which will be the engine behind UN Web TV.

In all these efforts, the Department is committed to and places multilingualism at the centre of our planning and implementation and provides multilingual content to the greatest extent possible within our means. Working with other UN partners, we continue to explore technical options and solutions to help provide more multilingual content.

The Department is in the midst of adapting its technical and logistical preparations for coverage of the upcoming General Assembly high-level period to take account of the fact that most events will either be fully virtual or with a highly reduced in-person presence.

Already, the two main annual components of DGC's Special Information Programme on the Question of Palestine, the International Media Seminar on Peace in the Middle East and the training programme for Palestinian journalists, are being adapted to become virtual events this year.

The closure of UN premises to the public has posed major challenges to the income-generating sections of the Department, resulting in the closure of the UN Bookshop in New York and a suspension of visitor services, including tours, lectures, and briefings, in all four duty stations, with very significant losses in income projected for 2020.

Visitor Services is developing new ways of engaging audiences and generating income, including by conducting virtual tours and online briefings in New York, and sharing informational videos in Vienna and Geneva. Thus far, New York Visitors' Services has conducted approximately 50 virtual tours and online briefings.

The Bookshop's closure has been partially mitigated by a transition to online sales of selected merchandise via [shop.un.org](http://shop.un.org). UN Publications has incorporated more than 60 COVID-19 publications and policy briefs on its digital platforms in multiple languages. At least 12 policy briefs by the Secretary-General have been published as e-books accessible to persons with disabilities. The Department, in cooperation with the network of UN system focal points on disability, is taking the lead in preparing new disability-inclusive communications guidelines, for use by UN staff, as part of the Secretary-General's UN Disability Inclusion Strategy.

Distinguished delegates,

While COVID-19 has necessarily become the focus of the Department's work this year, our efforts on other UN priorities, including the Sustainable Development Goals, continue apace. The SDG Media Compact, for instance, remains a powerful amplifier, with now more than 100 media companies reaching a combined global audience of over 2 billion with UN-created content. The SDG website continues to be one of the most-visited UN websites, with an average of more than 2.5 million pageviews per month across the six languages.

The Department continued to spotlight the UN's vital efforts in peacekeeping, peacebuilding and prevention. To coincide with the International Day of UN Peacekeepers in late May, colleagues worked closely with counterparts in the Department of Peace Operations on a month-long campaign on the critical role played by women peacekeepers. The multilingual effort used social media and UN News platforms to showcase the stories of individual peacekeepers, while UNICs supported outreach to specific troop-contributing and police-contributing countries. DGC also developed a communications strategy for the upcoming special political mission, UNITAMS, that has been established in Sudan by the Security Council.

Our focus on human rights involved work undertaken by the Remember Slavery Programme and the Holocaust and the UN Outreach Programme, which focused on links between the pandemic, racism against people of African descent, antisemitism and hate speech. A new webinar series called "Beyond the Long Shadow: Engaging with Difficult Histories," was launched in conjunction with the Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the UN.

The Department also continues to use the UN-75 milestone to reflect on the Organization and engage audiences worldwide on their ideas for the biggest global challenges we face. UNICs are hosting and organizing dialogues with stakeholders and the public. The Secretary-General's Youth Envoy has facilitated youth input in the UN-75 Declaration by Member States through a virtual townhall meeting which brought together more than 2,000 young people.

The Yearbook Unit produced a commemorative electronic publication entitled *Achieving our Common Humanity: Celebrating Global Cooperation Through the United Nations*, that will be distributed starting 21 September via [shop.un.org](http://shop.un.org) and other platforms. *UN Chronicle* published a special series of five reflections on the enduring value of the UN Charter by the leaders of the main organs of the UN.

Looking ahead, investing in resources for communications is imperative to optimizing performance. We have shown what we can do to promote the messages and work of the UN during a massive global crisis. As we build on the past months' tremendous successes, and work to make them the norm, we seek your continued support. Modern global communications require people and resources to be successful.

Mr. Chair, you have been generous in recognizing DGC as one of the most important departments when the pandemic hit. As I have stated, we sought to implement our new global communications strategy immediately in the context of the pandemic, underlining how UN communications are integral to the achievement of UN organizational objectives. This is what the Secretary-General has asked new UN communications to look like and I look forward to the support of the Committee and, indeed, of the General Assembly, to its many aspects. These include, among others: investments in staff training, and the resources and tools needed for real-time insights and media analysis; the creation of new multilingual communications content and products, including more interactive websites; podcasts and disability-inclusive resources, all backed by strong and innovative distribution systems such as new partnerships with tech and media companies; and closer Headquarters-field integration as well as an additional dedicated rapid response crisis communications cell.

These are just some instances of what we see as the beginning of modernizing UN global communications to make it a more powerful voice in support of UN principles and values – and the value your peoples and governments have invested in them. To do this, we need support, including political support, from you.

Distinguished delegates,

At a time when fear, division, rejection and loss of confidence can overwhelm what the UN Charter so eloquently described as “the dignity and worth of the human person”, it will remain our mission to foster hope, solidarity, acceptance and faith.

I thank you.

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