

# Communication by Social Security Administrations

Edition 2016

---

Open access version



The ISSA Guidelines for Social Security Administration consist of internationally-recognized professional standards in social security administration, and form part of the ISSA Centre for Excellence in Social Security Administration. The open access guideline documents are abridged versions of the complete ISSA Guidelines for Social Security Administration that are available to ISSA member organizations only. The latter are completed with information concerning the suggested operational structures for the functioning of individual guidelines and mechanisms for their implementation. Additional resources, references and links to good practice examples are also provided to assist comprehension. Within the practical framework of the ISSA Academy and Academy workshops, ISSA Guidelines for Social Security Administration offer a basis for learning and knowledge exchange among ISSA member organizations. For information on how to join the ISSA <[www.issa.int](http://www.issa.int)>.

The ISSA Guidelines have been developed by the ISSA technical commissions and staff of the ISSA General Secretariat, based on a broad consultation with experts, international organizations and the worldwide ISSA membership.

English is granted precedence as the authoritative language for all ISSA Guidelines.

The ISSA Guidelines and related resources are available at <[www.issa.int/excellence](http://www.issa.int/excellence)>.

While care has been taken in the preparation and reproduction of the data published herein, the ISSA declines liability for any inaccuracy, omission or other error in the data, and, in general, for any financial or other loss or damage in any way resulting from the use of this publication.

This publication is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 Unported License ([CC BY-NC-ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)).

First published in 2017.

ISBN 978-92-843-4226-6

© International Social Security Association 2016

# Contents

Introduction	1
Objectives of the <i>ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations</i>	1
Structure of the <i>ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations</i>	2
<b>A. Communication Principles</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Guideline 1.</b> Communicating the institution’s mandate	4
<b>Guideline 2.</b> Values and ethics in communication	4
<b>Guideline 3.</b> Communication as a leadership tool	4
<b>Guideline 4.</b> Consulting and engaging with stakeholders	4
<b>Guideline 5.</b> Segmenting stakeholders into groups	4
<b>B. Governance and Management</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Guideline 6.</b> Meeting statutory requirements	5
<b>Guideline 7.</b> Communication and strategic planning	5
<b>Guideline 8.</b> Monitoring and cost control	5
<b>Guideline 9.</b> Environmental scans	6
<b>Guideline 10.</b> Strategic use of new communication technology and social media	6
<b>Guideline 11.</b> Crisis management and communications	6
<b>C. Communication Unit</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Guideline 12.</b> Place of the communication unit in the institution	7
<b>Guideline 13.</b> Roles and responsibilities of the communication unit	7
<b>Guideline 14.</b> Client-centric information	7
<b>Guideline 15.</b> Corporate design and branding	7
<b>Guideline 16.</b> Accessible, inclusive and non-discriminatory communications	7
<b>Guideline 17.</b> Qualities and skills of communication professionals	7
<b>Guideline 18.</b> Information and communication technology as an enabler of communications	7
<b>Guideline 19.</b> Service level agreements	8
<b>Guideline 20.</b> Effectiveness of communication tools	8
<b>D. Internal Communication</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Guideline 21.</b> Purpose of internal communication	9
<b>Guideline 22.</b> Change management and communication	9

<b>E. External Communication</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Guideline 23.</b> Informing the citizen/client about benefits and services	10
<b>Guideline 24.</b> Relations with the media and the press	10
<b>Guideline 25.</b> Developing a social security culture	10
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>11</b>

OPEN ACCESS

## Introduction

Social security institutions play a vital role in society. As the main point of contact between the government and citizens, such institutions help individuals in situations in which they need support and advice. Citizens must be able to know where to look for support, and to know what support is available, how to access it and what are their rights and responsibilities. Above all, the institution has to deliver on its promise if it is to earn the trust of citizens.

Social security institutions have the important duty of informing citizens about their rights and responsibilities and helping them to make informed decisions, particularly with regard to the long-term consequences of those choices. This is why they should be proactive in reaching out and in communicating practical information with the intended audience in a way that is easily understood and through the appropriate channels, in a timely way.

The expansion of digital communication in society creates new possibilities for greater access to information in “real time”, where citizens are directly in quasi-permanent relation with institutions and other stakeholders. In this context, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of what the institution stands for, what its mandate is, what programmes and services it offers and what rights and responsibilities the citizens have.

The key to a successful social security institution lies in connecting the relevant external and internal stakeholders (e.g. beneficiaries, contributors, employers, social partners, politicians, social security system employees, media, etc.) to share information, knowledge, expertise, experiences and opinions, and ultimately create added value for the benefit of all parties involved.

An effective communication function should result in:

- Informed citizens who understand the benefits and the responsibilities attached to social security systems;
- Information made available in a way that is timely, accessible and adapted to the needs of the user, whether external (citizen, partner) or internal (employee);
- Better quality service delivery and cost containment by increasing general knowledge and encouraging self-service, thus reducing workloads on front-line staff;
- Increased confidence of the public in the institution’s ability to deliver its mandate, ultimately helping to get its messages adopted by the public.

The *ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations* provide a general framework for the good governance and systematic management of communication practices. These international professional standards were developed from a broad consultation with experts and the worldwide ISSA membership.

## **Objectives of the *ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations***

These *ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations* provide ISSA member institutions with insights into how communication can support the core mandate of the institution.

Good communication coupled with modern web and mobile-based technologies improves service quality while reducing administrative costs. It does so by providing support to the various business lines of the institution, by turning specialized jargon into standardized messages that are easier to understand by the public and by providing advice on how and to whom they should be conveyed. It reduces the need to respond to individual enquiries by facilitating self-serve approaches which in turn reduces workload for frontline staff. Communication plays a corporate role in conveying the overall image of the institution and its engagement toward the citizenry. Internally, communication fosters the development of an esprit de corps – a shared understanding – of the institution’s mission, values and commitment to service excellence.

The communication function also provides advice to senior management on the communication needs of the institution and on suitable initiatives to meet them. In that respect, communication permeates almost all aspects of the institution and for that reason the individual who has lead responsibility for communication usually sits at the senior management table.

The communication function performs and manages its own line activities such as media placement, media monitoring and evaluation of various communication activities. Perhaps the most important function is to serve as a clearing house for all communication activities within the institution. This requires quick and knowledgeable feedback and sign-off on other colleagues’ initiatives, and a clear delineation of roles. These are best embodied in service level agreements (SLA) where performance standards are set and agreed upon.

The guidelines support ISSA member institutions’ delivery of their mandate by offering guidance on:

- Developing a professional and effective communication structure/framework;
- Building a team of highly proficient communication experts;
- Setting and monitoring clear communication tools;
- Achieving excellence in the execution of communication.

### **Structure of the *ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations***

The guidelines are organized in five parts:

**Part A, Communication Principles**, provides guidelines to define the institution’s guiding principles on communication that lay the foundation on the way governance and the management of communication activities will be performed.

**Part B, Governance and Management**, provides guidelines to establish policies and practices to systematically carry out the wide spectrum of consistent communication-related activities.

**Part C, Communication Unit**, provides guidelines on the essential building blocks and functions performed in the communication services.

**Part D, Internal Communication**, provides guidelines on creating common understanding of the goals and challenges among the team.

**Part E, External Communication**, provides guidelines on communicating with the most important stakeholder – the client – as well as dialogue with external groups and individuals.

Within each part, specific guidelines are grouped according to elements presented as follows:

**Guideline.** The guideline is stated as clearly as possible.

**Structure.** This is the suggested structure that may support the application of the guideline and facilitate the promotion of the underlying principle. The structure indicates the goals and framework established by the board and by management.

**Mechanism.** There are different ways through which a guideline may be implemented.

The Guidelines also include a self-assessment tool for social security administrations, and links to technical references and examples of good practice.

In these guidelines, the Communication Unit refers to the institution's staff responsible for the implementation and operations of communication, regardless of institutional structure. Such tasks can be undertaken by internal staff or external contracted agents. In most institutions, some communication functions are devolved to business units or specialized units that conduct specific activities.

OPEN ACCESS

## A. Communication Principles

Institutions should be guided by principles on communication, laying the foundations on which governance and the management of communication activities are to be performed.

### **Guideline 1. Communicating the institution's mandate**

The communication framework, strategies and plans emanate from the mandate, mission and vision of the institution. Communication reinforces the institution's abiding commitment to its mission, vision and values.

### **Guideline 2. Values and ethics in communication**

All information communicated is accurate, clear, verifiable, relevant, timely and up-to-date. Personal information is protected and only used for the purpose for which it was collected.

Social security institutions are custodians of large quantities of personal information that must be strictly protected.

### **Guideline 3. Communication as a leadership tool**

Communication is a strategic tool that is used to motivate and inspire employees to work as a coherent team, in the pursuit of excellence.

### **Guideline 4. Consulting and engaging with stakeholders**

The institution remains in touch with its internal and external stakeholders in order to listen before speak.

It is important to maintain ongoing engagement and active listening to ensure that the institution proactively adapts and responds to its environment. This openness must be sustained by concrete actions if it is to be credible both inside and outside the institution. A consultation framework defines the basic essentials that support effective interaction with the institution's intended audience. The consultation framework includes the communication objectives to be achieved, target stakeholders, the channels to be used, the human and ICT support to be provided, timelines, and mechanisms for stakeholder feedback and exchange.

### **Guideline 5. Segmenting stakeholders into groups**

To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of its communication activities, the institution identifies the major groups and sub-groups of its stakeholders.

## B. Governance and Management

Communication for social security administrations requires establishing policies and practices to carry out the wide spectrum of communication-related activities in support of the overall mandate of the institution and of the specific needs of internal units. Such policies and practices aim to guide the institution to:

- Align the communication strategy with the business objectives of the institution (“doing the right things”);
- Ensure that communication activities are up to standard (“doing things right”).

The effective and efficient management of communication should be based on the governance principles of accountability, transparency, predictability, participation and dynamism.

These principles guide the development of business processes to manage communications in a practical way, in the knowledge that:

- The more complex a subject is, the more communication and more means for communication are needed;
- “Strategy” is top-down, but “tactic” is often bottom-up.

As an indispensable enabler in the building of the reputation of the institution, communication can make a difference between the acceptance or rejection of a new policy direction, or in the successful implementation of a new programme or activities. For this reason, an early factoring of communication aspects of policy or operational changes is highly desirable. It is therefore important that senior management gain an understanding of the role that effective communication can play in supporting the institution’s objectives and operations. Conversely, to play that role, it is important that all communication advice take account of the operational requirements, policy imperatives and capacity of the organization.

### Guideline 6. Meeting statutory requirements

**The institution fully meets all statutory requirements with regard to reporting requirements, disclosure and access to information.**

### Guideline 7. Communication and strategic planning

**Communication is an essential part of the institution’s strategic plan. It identifies shared objectives, aligns the work of staff and resources and sustains stakeholder support internally and externally.**

A strategic plan spells out the key business strategies and plans of action of an institution over a three- to five-year period.

### Guideline 8. Monitoring and cost control

**The communication unit allocates and spends its budget to achieve its goals in the most effective and cost-efficient manner.**

## **Guideline 9. Environmental scans**

The institution regularly gathers news and information and selects those that may have an impact on its operations and its stakeholders.

## **Guideline 10. Strategic use of new communication technology and social media**

The institution is aware of innovative communication technology and makes informed decisions about the use of social media in communication.

## **Guideline 11. Crisis management and communications**

In time of crisis, the institution maintains public confidence, minimizes disruption in operations and mitigates reputational risks through the provision of timely, coherent, accurate and appropriate communication. Anticipation, timing, and competent response are critical elements of any crisis plan.

OPEN ACCESS

## C. Communication Unit

The communication unit and the functions it performs are essential to effective communication services.

### **Guideline 12. Place of the communication unit in the institution**

The head of the communication unit is part of the senior management team to ensure that appropriate communication support is provided to all plans, actions and decisions of the institution.

### **Guideline 13. Roles and responsibilities of the communication unit**

The institution communicates effectively its mission and vision, and its abiding commitment to deliver on its mandate.

### **Guideline 14. Client-centric information**

Communication supports the information needs of clients as they relate to the programmes and services provided by the institution.

### **Guideline 15. Corporate design and branding**

The communication unit develops a unique corporate design for the institution derived from the institution's mission and vision. All communication materials and activities of the institution use the corporate design as a branding tool.

### **Guideline 16. Accessible, inclusive and non-discriminatory communications**

The institution commits itself to open and inclusive use of language in communication.

### **Guideline 17. Qualities and skills of communication professionals**

Communication staff are able to develop their skills and capabilities through a specialized communication staff development programme.

### **Guideline 18. Information and communication technology as an enabler of communications**

Advances in information and communication technology (ICT) are explored for cost efficiency and to facilitate interactions with the institution.

## **Guideline 19. Service level agreements**

The communication unit establishes service level agreements with relevant internal units for the provision of communication services.

## **Guideline 20. Effectiveness of communication tools**

The communication unit develops a set of indicators to assess the effectiveness of the materials, forms of media and tools that are used to communicate with internal and external stakeholders.

OPEN ACCESS

## D. Internal Communication

Internal communication is a powerful tool to create a shared understanding of the mission and objectives of the institution, and to improve cohesion, loyalty and engagement resulting in a collaborative environment across the institution.

### **Guideline 21. Purpose of internal communication**

Internal communication can be used as a tool to develop and strengthen the corporate identity and culture of an institution. It does so by promoting values central to this identity such as a culture of teamwork, collaboration and performance excellence by enhancing employees' sense of belonging, their engagement and their commitment to service excellence.

### **Guideline 22. Change management and communication**

Communication is a strategic tool in change management. Information is provided on what the change is, why it is necessary, what will be the benefits, and how and when it will be implemented. Good communications allow for issues to be quickly identified and addressed while maintaining momentum and building acceptance for the change.

OPEN ACCESS

## E. External Communication

Effective external communication with the client, the most important stakeholder, is essential, as is dialogue with external groups and individuals.

### **Guideline 23. Informing the citizen/client about benefits and services**

**The institution provides accurate and easy to understand information on its programmes and services, through various channels.**

The communication units play a key role in ensuring that the information provided through publications, Internet, etc., is directly supportive of the operational requirements of the institution. Good communications will reduce the number of enquiries and in-person visits, and reduce the risk of errors. The information provided across the various channels (mail, email, telephone, internet, mobile and in-person) must convey the same content even if the format differs. Messages must remain consistent regardless of channel or format.

### **Guideline 24. Relations with the media and the press**

**The institution proactively develops and maintains a professional relationship with the media and the press.**

Social security programmes are often very complex. It is highly desirable that the media understand the programmes so that they can fully play their part in providing accurate information to the public.

### **Guideline 25. Developing a social security culture**

**The institution uses communication as a strategic tool to develop a social security culture based on rights and responsibilities.**

## Acknowledgements

The ISSA Guidelines for Social Security Administration were prepared by the ISSA General Secretariat with the ISSA technical commissions.

The *ISSA Guidelines on Communication by Social Security Administrations* were produced as a result of close collaboration between the ISSA General Secretariat and a steering committee chaired by Emilio S. De Quiros Jr., Chair of the Technical Commission on Organization, Management and Innovation, representing the ISSA Technical Commissions on: Actuarial issues; Contributions' Collection and Compliance; Employment Policies and Unemployment Insurance; Family Policies; Information and Communication Technology; Insurance against Employment Accidents and Occupational Diseases; Medical Care and Sickness Insurance; Mutual Benefit Societies; Pensions; and the Special Commission on Prevention.

These guidelines were prepared by Dominique La Salle and Guillaume Filhon from the ISSA, and by Eric Eggink and Anouk Haverkort of the Eggink Van Manen communication consultancy. Review, commentary and other inputs were generously provided by an expert committee composed of Fatima Al Shuraiqi, Joëlle Grünspan, Pascal Martin, Stefan Boltz, Jonathan Olsson and Barbara Owsiak. Sten Erikson and Maribel Ortiz provided extensive comments and suggestions, as did member organizations of the International Social Security Association.

OPEN ACCESS

4 route des Morillons  
Case postale 1  
CH-1211 Geneva 22

T: +41 22 799 66 17  
F: +41 22 799 85 09  
E: [issa@ilo.org](mailto:issa@ilo.org) | [www.issa.int](http://www.issa.int)

