

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS OR CHALLENGING SITUATION FOR CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: *Civil society is an important pillar of a democratic society, and civil society organisations (CSOs) operate for a number of good reasons: for charitable causes, to raise funds for others, to educate, mobilise and unite around a common cause, to serve as a foundation to support others, and many other reasons. In order to achieve their statutory objectives, but also to carry out activities for the benefit of communities, CSOs must have effective communication both internally within the organisation and with its beneficiaries, known as “external communication”. Effective communication is often disrupted by a series of objective and subjective factors, by internal and external stakeholders, and if this process is not controlled and managed effectively and in a timely manner, crisis situations can arise.*

In order to achieve the statutory goals, but also to carry out activities for the benefit of communities, CSOs must have effective communication both at the internal organizational level and with its beneficiaries, so-called “external communication”. Effective communication is often hampered by a number of objective and subjective factors, by internal and external stakeholders, and if this process is not controlled and managed efficiently in time, then crisis situations may arise. In this article, we wish to analyse the importance of the communication process in crisis situations and the challenges for civil society organisations. The focus is on analysing the situation in the Republic of Moldova, and the author considers it appropriate to conduct this analysis in the context of current challenges, previously determined by the Covid-19 pandemic and now by the military conflict in Ukraine, which requires special attention.

Keywords: *crisis, challenge, communication, civil society organisation, management.*

Introduction

Civil society is an important pillar in a democratic society, and civil society organizations (CSOs) operate for a number of good reasons – for charitable causes, to fund raise for others, to educate, to mobilise and associate for a common cause, to be a foundation to support others and many other reasons.

In order to achieve the statutory goals, but also to carry out activities for the benefit of communities, CSOs must have effective communication both at the internal organizational level and with its beneficiaries, so-called “external communication”.

Effective communication is often hampered by a number of objective and subjective factors, by internal and external stakeholders, and if this process is not controlled and managed efficiently in time, then crisis situations may arise. Crises, also, in whatever form they appear, constitute a less pleasant phenomenon for civil society organizations. Regardless of the professional experience that the members of the CSO, or the organization itself, have, no one is guaranteed to avoid crises.

In order for them to be managed efficiently and overcome more easily, members of civil society organizations use several communication tools, adapted to current situations.

In this article, we aim to analyse the importance of the communication process in crisis situations and the challenges for civil society organizations. The focus is on analysing the situation in the Republic of Moldova, and the author believes it is appropriate to conduct this analysis in the context of current challenges, previously determined by the Covid-19 pandemic and now by the military conflict in Ukraine, which also requires special attention.

Defining the concept of “crisis”, “challenge” and “crisis situation”

There are not many works that address the issue of communication crisis and image crisis at the level of civil society organizations and which have tried to capture and subsequently develop the concept of “crisis” as an essential element that can influence the existence and evolution of an organization. Thus, some authors have treated the problem exclusively from the perspective of an “attempt” to the existence and evolution of an organization. On the other hand, the contribution of other authors who consider the crisis as a challenge, an opportunity that must be capitalized on and thus the organization will become much more stable is noteworthy. We believe that effective crisis management requires special communication dedicated to the crisis, which can “not only ameliorate or eliminate the crisis but can sometimes bring the organization a greater reputation than before the crisis” (Cristache, 2012: 26-27).

In the specialized literature, the concept of “crisis” represents a significant and serious situation that occurs as a result of any insufficiently managed incident and leads to major negative effects, which tarnish the reputation or credibility of civil society organizations and which cause major or chain material or human damage.

On the other hand, a “crisis situation” can be defined as a complex phenomenon, an unforeseen situation, which can call into question the responsibility of an institution before public opinion, which can threaten the institution’s ability to carry out its activity normally and which can damage the public image of the institution. A crisis can also be caused by the faulty organization of the exchange of information between an institution and public opinion, carried out through the media.

In our work, a special role is also played by the examination of the term “challenge”, which by definition would represent a situation or task that requires effort and skill to overcome or successfully complete. It is seen as an opportunity to test and stretch personal or professional limits, stimulating growth and development. The essential challenge of the communication process is that of conflict resolution.

The communication process, difficult even in the best of times, is put to the test in crisis situations, when there is a high degree of uncertainty, when information that confirms or supports ongoing events may be missing. People are constantly searching for information and tend to become dependent on the media. The crisis forces civil society organizations to provide accurate and complete information to the press and the public as quickly as possible. (SCCS, 2020: 7-10).

The new challenges of the political, social and economic environment in the Republic of Moldova affect the internal performance of civil society organizations, as well as their relationship with external stakeholders. Quality communication requires a partnership, a cooperative relationship between the organization and various categories of the public – political decision-makers, beneficiaries, mass media, etc.

There are many situations when dysfunctions occur inside and outside the organization with implications and consequences for the entire organizational system. We can mention in this case: disagreements, tensions between employees, accidents within the civil society organization, incidents, the organization's involvement in an activity/project that led to modest results and with insignificant impact for the community, etc.

In many such situations, the organization may face an organizational crisis with implications for its image. Once in the media spotlight, the organization must implement an effective crisis management plan to resolve the existing situation as quickly as possible and reduce the negative effects. In most cases, the image crisis causes an organizational crisis. Thus, the need arises to resolve both crises and promote a new identity for the organization. No event tests an organization more strongly than a sudden crisis. Inevitably, even the most responsible, innovative or impacted organization will occasionally go through emergency situations that require the application of crisis communication strategies.

Thus, crisis management involves two distinct aspects: on the one hand, preparing the organization for situations in which communication and the corresponding infrastructure would be paralyzed, and on the other, putting the plan into practice for crisis situations.

Internal and external causes of crisis situations.

The cause of a crisis situation can be internal or external. *Internal causes* can include: divergent positions on a certain subject within the same institution; divergent positions communicated publicly; deviations from regulations and authorizations of employed personnel; possible conflicts of interest, incorrect professional or moral conduct of some employees or officials; poor management at the institution level. *External causes*, completely beyond the control of the institution, are difficult to anticipate and, most of the time, impossible to avoid. This includes legislative and/or institutional changes that may affect the institution's field of activity; hostile press campaigns against the institution; fires; bomb threats; to force majeure, caused by natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, epidemics) or situations of armed conflict.

In recent times, crises have become more frequent and intense and, unfortunately, most of the time they are not easy to manage, because they are caused from outside, but require a solution for each community. Unfortunately, CSOs' activity often remains „in the shadows” due to modest communication with the public. During COVID times (2020-2022) and now, the military conflict in Ukraine (since 2022), there raised an urgent need for CSOs, government and other groups to reach specific constituents and audiences. We see the challenges of coordinating messages and using channels of communications effectively to avoid misinformation and confusion. Such disruptive times remind us of the need to be well-prepared in the event of crisis and other challenging situations such as natural disasters or when there's a merger of organizations and so forth. Of course, the basic justification is the lack of financial resources or time to develop communication activities. In the digital age, however, when we have numerous communication platforms at our disposal, most of which are free, it would be a shame not to take advantage of them to increase the visibility of the organization and the initiatives it develops. (Iacob, 2003: 14-19)

However, crisis communication, as a whole, offers a range of tools that can reduce the impact of the crisis by correctly informing and training the public, strengthening society and agility in the response to the crisis. The insufficient organization of communication through the media of CSOs in Moldova is based on a series of a system-related factors:

- a) The system is complex, which makes a quick reaction difficult to obtain;
- b) The system often communicates through several voices, generating distrust among the public;
- c) Reactions are sometimes late and are no longer able to correct the impact of the first information;
- d) Pro-active communication, which could prevent certain crisis situations, is insufficient;
- e) Most of the time, communication is not done by trained/specialized communication personnel (GCSC, 2022: 4)

Practice has always proven that proactive management is more effective in crisis situations. Thus, the better prepared the organization is, the greater the chances of survival in the face of crises. Regardless of the type of organization or the management adopted, there must be a strategy at the management level to prepare the organization in the event of a crisis.

The levels necessary for developing and implementing a strategy are: auditing the organization; planning actions; evaluating the communication process and improving the plan.

The *auditing level*, namely analyzing the state of the organization, involves monitoring it on four levels: psychological, cultural, structural and strategic. Speaking about *psychological level* organizations prone to crisis operate as a closed system; are introverted and defensive; have strong defense mechanisms against anxiety. Organizations prepared for a crisis are concerned with solving problems; have adequate mechanisms for overcoming anxiety; and prove positive thinking. In the context of *cultural level*, organizations prone to crisis are not aware of the influence of organizational culture and do not accept cultural values. In relations to *structural level*, organizations prone to crisis do not have specialized structures in managing crisis situations; are focused on the balance between flexibility and control; do not have special crisis management mechanisms. And finally, speaking about strategic level, organizations prone to crisis: adopt a traditional strategic management; focus on survival; demonstrate limited goals; and do not have special crisis management strategies.

The *planning stage* is defining for the success of a crisis strategy. The content and main coordinates of such a plan are: identification of potential crises, such as: important events (conflicts, accidents) that have occurred within a CSO recently and may affect it in the future; the crisis model to which it corresponds and the date on which the plan is developed; goals, objectives and strategies adopted; forming a team of initial communicators, who will answer press questions until the extended team takes action; choosing a competent spokesperson; developing a set of standard press releases to confirm events; establishing distribution channels – briefings, press conferences, radio and television appearances, etc.

The *evaluation communication process* is put to the test in crisis situations, when there is a high degree of uncertainty, when information that confirms or supports ongoing events may be lacking. Any CSO that designs an image strategy must be aware of the following aspects: the external public is not its exclusive property; external communication channels, through their policy, tend to ensure greater visibility for the negative aspects of the organization's activity than for the positive ones; most of the time, communication channels aim to create their own identity and distinction through their own way of

disseminating news. In some cases, an image crisis can reveal how rational an organization's policy is, so rational that the crisis has a beneficial outcome for the organization.

Factors influencing communication in crisis situations:

- the exponential increase in the public's demand for information;
- reduced time for checking information about the evolution of events;
- the need to ensure coherence of messages for various categories of the public;
- the need to capitalize on the opportunities offered by new communication channels;
- increased pace of message transmission;
- increased possibilities for message distortion; increased visibility of the organization;
- increased role of employees, their support and consequently internal communication;
- existence of differences in perception at the level of the external public, employees and mass media. (Iacob, 2003: 111-112)

In conclusion, many crises reveal possibilities for the emergence of new initiatives and opportunities to strengthen the organization's reputation. They can encourage the concentration of efforts to achieve the CSO's objectives. The opportunities that a crisis can generate are related to: demonstrating the viability of the organization, the possibility of management to manage such crises, the possibility of mobilizing the resources necessary for difficult situations, highlighting the organization's structures capable of reacting appropriately in such situations. On this occasion, the CSO's personnel can demonstrate their attachment to the organization's values by ensuring a favorable attitude of the environment towards the organization (Cristache, 2012: 24).

The process of crisis situation in external communication of CSOs

In the context of external communication, process of crisis situation is different and has another course of development. Moreover, any crisis unfolds in several stages, each of which has a different intensity and impact and, as mentioned above, requires a different communication approach. For good communication management, we will define the following phases and responses through communication:

Crisis anticipation phase. This is the stage at which an incident occurs or at which signs of a problem are detected that, if not resolved in time, may degenerate into a crisis. The actions to be undertaken are: monitoring and recognizing emerging risks; educating the general public about risks; preparing the public for the possibility of an adverse event or response; providing warning messages regarding an imminent threat or situation; collaborating and cooperating with other institutions, agencies, organizations and groups; developing consensus recommendations from experts. developing and testing messages to be used in the event of a necessity; Development and testing of communication systems.

Initial phase of the crisis. At the onset of a crisis, when the CSOs needs to communicate with the public and stakeholders about an event that: occurred unexpectedly, is not entirely under the control of the administration, requires an immediate response, may harm the reputation, image or viability of the CSOS. This type of communication is an "emergency" one and involves the need to inform and alert the public about an event. In this case, crisis communication is an effort by the CSO to inform the public about an event with a negative connotation. The communication objectives in the initial phase include rapid communication to the general public and rapid communication with affected groups. (GCSC, 2022: 23-26)

These communication efforts will be directed towards achieving the following objectives:

- Reducing disruption and uncertainty;
- Establishing a general and broad understanding of the crisis circumstances and consequences;
- Reducing as much as possible the uncertainty related to the crisis;
- Educating the public about the responsibilities of the various actors involved in resolving the crisis;
- Communication in the initial stages of an emergency situation will be simple, credible, precise, consistent and delivered on time.

In the initial phase of a crisis, situations are confusing and arouse increased interest from the population and the media, information is usually incomplete and facts are few. To manage information well at this stage, the CSO will demonstrate fairness, while recognizing that it does not have all the data and will not mitigate the responsibility to communicate, even if the communication is an honest “we do not know”. At the very least, messages should demonstrate that the CSO is involved and addresses the problem directly. This means that approaches are reasonable, thoughtful and timely and are brought to the attention of the public. These messages will necessarily be coordinated with all members of the CSO.

Ongoing crisis phase. Communication objectives during the crisis response phase include discussions with the general public and other stakeholders. It is important in this phase that the public is provided with up-to-date information, understands current risks, and knows how these risks will be mitigated. Also, CSOs must provide background and support information to those who need it. Finally, receiving the feedback from affected audiences is crucial.

Crisis resolution phase. The communication objectives for the resolution phase will include continuing to communicate with the general public and affected groups. In this phase, communicators will: explain to the public the ongoing resolution efforts undertaken by the CSOs; motivate people to understand these actions taken and their importance; facilitate broad, honest and open discussions about causes, blame, responsibility, resolutions and the adequacy of the response; contribute to improving individual understanding of new risks; promote risk-averse behaviors; promote the study of legislation and personal preparation; conduct activities to strengthen the image of the CSOs; Persuade the public to support the decisions made or actions taken. As the crisis resolves, there may be a return to the status quo, with a better understanding of what has occurred. This phase is characterized by much lower interest from the public and the media. There may be an opportunity to strengthen messages while the issue is still current. In this case, the CSO will organize a public education campaign, as the community is much more likely to respond to the administration’s messages at this time.

Assessment Phase. The objectives of the assessment phase include community-oriented communication:

- Discussing the situation, documenting it and lessons learned;
- Establishing specific actions to improve crisis communication and crisis response capacity;
- Evaluating the performance of the communication plan;

- The CSOs will generate a post-action report, sometimes called a “hot analysis” or “lessons learned”, through a process of reviewing records and consulting with key stakeholders. (GCSC, 2022: 14-17)

Thus, we have observed that crises are undoubtedly present. Objectively, they will always appear, and the detection and awareness of the present crisis, its monitoring and coherent management will be able to bring expected results.

Crisis communication management

Crisis communication management is a field that has relatively recently captured the interest of organizations, and especially their management, at the internal level. Crisis management is, as a general assessment, an extremely complex activity that involves both the ability to anticipate crises through effective communication, the creation of scenarios to keep variables under control and resolve situations, and a rapid response to the emergence of a crisis. Strategy studies in the field of crises start from the assumption that the image of a phenomenon is more important than the reality of that phenomenon. (Cristache, 2012: 25-26)

Crisis management strategies try to determine the ways in which communication can be used to minimize the deterioration of the image of the CSO faced with the crisis. Although each image crisis is unique and requires different means of resolution, there are still some common characteristics:

- It does not appear suddenly, it has a slow evolution, being influenced by the atmosphere of the communication environment;
- It overlaps and is determined by a crisis of organizational culture;
- Requires comprehensive assessments and analyses;
- Has long-term effects; the credibility and reputation of the organization are affected;
- The existence of the organization is at risk if measures are not taken to restore the public image.

A major crisis means a period of intense activity for the public relations service of the CSO. This tests the organization's ability to cope with a situation that, if handled improperly, can end disastrously for it.

The effective resolution of image crises is influenced by the concept of crises and the techniques implemented to resolve them. Both internal problems related to the effective functioning of the organization and communication aspects are targeted. Sometimes the crisis does not even exist, it can be just an unfounded, but devastating rumor at the same time. A well-defined and positive image is a good investment, an insurance policy against an unpredictable future.

The excellent image of the CSO will create a “source of goodwill” among the public that will help the public overcome a crisis situation. The specialized literature does not provide standard formulas that guarantee the success of overcoming a crisis situation. However, the factors that must be taken into account are:

- Organizational culture variables;
- Source of the crisis;
- History of the CSO in terms of previous crises.

Conclusions

Specialists mention that there will be times when a CSO faces a difficult or disruptive situation such as a natural disaster or situations that come suddenly such as the COVID-19 pandemic or military conflict in Ukraine. Such circumstances tend to put civil society organisations, its members or stakeholders at risk or in challenging situations. It could also happen that CSOs are facing a merger, a potential change in mission, or even when a CSO is receiving negative feedback. A crisis communications plan will enable the CSO to be in better control when such challenging situations occur so that it is possible to properly respond accurately and promptly.

Similarly, CSOs are often carrying out various activities that need to be promoted – eg. announcing an event, sharing an annual report, advocating for a cause, fundraising for an activity, or even planning a fixed term campaign, etc. The needs are many and each of them would do well to be first considered as part of the CSO's strategy. The plan to promote the CSO and to communicate adequately within the organization and outside it, is a part of well-structured strategy. Once a broad strategy is finalised, it's followed by a communications plan to detail how to make the strategy a reality. (SCCS, 2020: 66-68).

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