



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHAPTER 1: METHOD OF WORK

The Task Group consulted over an eight month period with South African institutions, professional bodies and all levels of government. Thirty seven meetings were held in public, sixty one presentations made and one hundred and fifty written submissions received. The Task Group also consulted with nineteen government and four international organisations. Specialised media monitoring, and a study of media ownership and control were commissioned, and all departments, ministries and provinces completed questionnaires and many additional players were interviewed by a researcher.

CHAPTER 2: FRAMEWORK AND CONSTRAINTS

The findings of the Task Group are framed in the context of the new constitutional democracy, the political imperatives of social and economic development, and also seek to reflect the thinking and best communications practice of successful democracies in the developed and developing world. They also take account of the legacy of apartheid, the poverty of its communications systems, and the need to open up channels of access, particularly at local community level.

A new communications system is an economic and political imperative for the "information age". Its purpose must be to provide a network throughout the country which provides every citizen with the information required to live and to control their lives.

The new government communication and information system needs to be better coordinated and more focussed in its messages. It should strengthen the capability of government to communicate its policies to the people, and be streamlined, credible, cost-effective and highly professional. To do this it will need to engage better with civil society, creating a dialogue between government and the public.

Such delivery requires leadership from the centre of government - the Presidency - but also decentralised implementation through ministries, departments and provincial and local government. For this, a more professional cadre of communicators is required, as well as better cooperation with the media and community at large.

The Task Group report is written within a given framework which includes the new constitutional principles and the citizen's "right to know", the government objective of creating a leaner and more efficient public service, affirmative action, and the importance of pluralism in the ownership and control of media.

The report delineates critical constraints which new policies should take into account. These are: the low status of government communicators, a tradition of inflexible and inward-looking bureaucracy, a high level of concentration of media ownership, a journalism profession impoverished by Apartheid, obsolete media legislation and finally, the reality of severe resource constraints on government.

F The term 'Presidency' is used to refer to the offices of the Presidential and Deputy President throughout.

CHAPTER 3: GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS IN 1996

National and Provincial Government currently employ 1,095 and 406 communication personnel respectively, and spend a total of R380m per year on communications staff, operations and publicity. No common standards exist for measuring communication costs, which make firm figures difficult to obtain. However, very wide variations in resource allocations throughout departments and provinces are apparent.

SACS employs over half the communication personnel of national government. It suffers from poor morale and no mandate. It has a low level of interaction with departments and provinces and meets their needs fitfully. A majority of government communicators at all levels favours a central service agency with a more defined focus, and provinces want SACS regional structures to be discontinued.

Overall, Government lacks central coordination in messaging, adequate planning of information campaigns, and communications has a low priority as reflected in its budgets and the status of communicators.

CHAPTER 4: THE SOUTH AFRICAN MEDIA

This year has seen a dilution of the historically high level of concentration in the media through empowerment deals, and further foreign investment is anticipated. Media diversity has been significantly advanced through IBA licensing of community radio, and the sale of SABC regional radio stations. Particular concern exists about the distribution monopoly which may inhibit the viability of small or new titles. Public funding for the national broadcaster and for community media is identified as important for attaining media diversity. Government should also take steps to remove anachronistic legislation which compromises press freedom.

Government and media relations in a democracy are always sensitive, and occasionally acrimonious. Apartheid weakened the profession in South Africa, and there is agreement in the industry that capacity-building is needed to improve standards, and to open the profession and media management to disadvantaged groups. The Task Group survey indicated that the South African media, especially the press, lacks experienced journalists able to cover stories in depth and in context.

CHAPTER 5: DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES

A fundamental need of government communications is to reach the majority of the population, especially the disadvantaged. Inadequate public infrastructure in broadcasting and telecommunications is an obstacle to this - with the exception of radio it fails to reach the majority. A closely coordinated strategy to extend this infrastructure is required within government. Private sector finance and expertise is essential, and there is also a need to make better use of existing public infrastructure such as post offices and libraries. Simplicity of language and easy access is needed - new technology can overcome barriers of illiteracy and the cost of distribution, and multi-purpose information centres are a good way to facilitate access.

CHAPTER 6: INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES - COMMUNICATING IN A DEMOCRACY

The Task Group surveyed government communication systems in 19 countries including ten developing countries. We found common trends and practices in these countries.

Effective media relations is always associated with a recipe of coordinated government messaging, led by professional communication officials with status, who work directly with and have free access to ministers and officials. Well-structured coordination and clear lines of responsibility are essential.

Government outreach includes a wide variety of methods, but places emphasis on electronic channels. Didactic messages or government "slots" are not particularly effective tools, and though not unusual in democracies are limited. Radio is a critical vehicle for reaching poor or remote communities. New technology and the use of the Internet are generally more advanced in other countries, including the developing countries visited, than in South Africa.

Most democracies have a central communication institution that handles government-wide services (e.g. training, analysis, advertising) but which is not a centralised voice of government. Decentralised communication is the most effective, where information is imparted from that point in government closest to the target audience.

CHAPTER 7: SOUTH AFRICA SEEN FROM ABROAD

South Africa needs a more focussed information drive with better cooperation between different branches of government involved in advancing interests abroad. Missions are seriously hampered in their promotion of South Africa by the lack of timely information on the background to decisions. Improved coordination in overseas visits by national and provincial leaders is important to avoid sending mixed or confusing messages. Most countries visited - including developing countries at a comparable economic level to South Africa - have a more integrated approach to foreign promotion, with better information services and on-line data. Despite enduring goodwill towards South Africa, more focus and better service to missions is vital to success in a highly competitive global economy.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

A total of 83 recommendations is advanced. These are based on the premise that considerable savings to the public purse can be effected through a more modern, streamlined and effective communication system.

STRUCTURES (RECOMMENDATIONS 1-26)

Improved public access to government communication and information needs to be tied to improved telecommunication and broadcasting capacity. The challenge cross-cuts many departments. It is recommended that a Cabinet Committee on the Information Economy be established to oversee an integrated strategy, and that it be chaired by the Deputy President. The involvement of Cabinet in policy on a variety of aspects relating to the information economy is proposed.

The centre point of the Task Group's recommendations is the establishment of a Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) with three components:

- Media Liaison
- Communications Service Agency
- Provincial Liaison

The GCIS would ensure coordination, and be managed by a small unit in the Presidency led by a Head of Government Communications. The unit would also include senior officials with responsibility for media (Chief Spokesperson) and for Provincial Liaison.

Each Minister would also appoint a Head of Communications, either a public servant or contract employee, working direct from the Ministry and responsible for all aspects of departmental communications.

The proposed system would be introduced with the assistance of Communications 2000, a professional advisory and consultative body to the Presidency established for a two year period (1997 - 1998)

FUNCTIONS (RECOMMENDATIONS 27-53)

The functions of the above components would be as follows:

- Media Liaison would involve a regular (weekly) meeting between the Head of Government Communications and the Chief Spokesperson and the Head of Communications in departments.
- This would be the main locus of all government-wide coordination of messages, campaigns and information.
- The Communication Service Agency (CSA) would be a streamlined agency with a small highly professional staff. The CSA can deliver to its "clients" (departments, provinces, local government) the following key services: a development information service, professional training, bulk buying of advertising, campaign management advice, media services, opinion polling, information technology development (government Homepage), and coordination of overseas visitors. The CSA would also seek to promote a common identity and image for government.
- It is proposed that SACS be dissolved and relevant resources be subsumed under the CSA; personnel employed by SACS should be given preference in applying for posts in the CSA.
- A Provincial Liaison structure would be a standing body which brings together provincial communicators with the senior officials in the GCIS. The aim of this would be to identify areas of common concern and joint activities with mutual benefits.
- Communications 2000 would include the Head of the GCIS and CSA, plus experts from the private and community sectors providing their services pro bono. It would advise the Presidency on restructuring, the development of training and a government human resource development plan for communicators, improved international communication, plain language and accessibility, and media diversity issues. It would also help to draw up criteria for an annual planning cycle to measure communications budgets, performance and output across government.

PERSONNEL AND TRAINING (RECOMMENDATIONS 54-58)

The report recommends that government establish a professional stream within the public service for communications personnel. A skills and personnel audit should be conducted to assist the development of training, and staff should be appointed against a new set of professional criteria. It is proposed that a standardised training course be developed as a qualifying criterion. The advancement of affirmative action should be pursued.

A National Training Programme (NTP) for communication professionals should be established. It can be jointly funded and delivered the profession and appropriate NGOs and universities.

IMPROVING SOUTH AFRICA'S IMAGE IN THE WORLD (RECOMMENDATIONS 59-63)

It is recommended that the Department of Foreign Affairs lead the development of an integrated information system for overseas missions. DFA, together with DTI, SATOUR and other relevant departments should establish an information system on South Africa using the Internet and other mechanisms. Approval mechanisms for ministerial travel overseas should ensure that DFA/missions are informed to enable them to provide appropriate support, and similar cooperative mechanisms put in place for the overseas travel of provincial MEC's and other appropriate people.

INFORMATION DEVELOPMENT (RECOMMENDATIONS 64-67)

The report emphasises the importance of building a network of information delivery points across the country. Current initiatives to support Multipurpose Information Centres should receive support. The Department of Telecommunications proposal for the development of the role of post offices is of particular importance in this regard. Recommendations in this area cross-cut ministries and departments, and the Cabinet Committee on the Information Economy is recommended to advance this issue.

ACCESS TO INFORMATION (RECOMMENDATIONS 68-76)

A number of legislative matters are important for creating an environment of access to information including the Open Democracy Act and the removal of anachronistic legislation that impinges on the freedom of the press.

Greater use of plain language in all government documents and legislation is advocated. Policy in this regard is also referred to the Cabinet Committee on the Information Economy. It would also be a major cost-saving measure. It is recommended that braille and signing be incorporated into government communications plans.

Government departments and statutory bodies should be required to make all unclassified documents available in electronic form to the proposed government Homepage, and private bodies should not be accorded proprietary status of such material. Further efforts should be made to establish a system of cataloguing of all government documentation.

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT (RECOMMENDATIONS 77-83)

Funding for the development of the role of the national public broadcaster on a triennial basis is essential, and should be given priority by the Cabinet Committee on the Information Economy.

Support for the community media sector, on a matching finance basis with the industry and foreign donors, should be provided by government. This scheme should be delivered through a statutorily recognised media development agency.

Channel Africa is a national priority which should be financed by the state (not by the public broadcaster). The appropriate route for this financing is the Department of Foreign Affairs.

The overall issue of monopolies within the print media should be referred to the Competitions Board. Existing distributors of mass market newspapers be licensed with common carrier status in terms of legislation required to ensure fair and equitable treatment for the distribution of all newspapers and periodicals.

A parliamentary broadcast service similar to C-Span in the United States should be investigated in conjunction with the national public broadcaster.

IMPLEMENTATION

A set of suggested milestones for the establishment of the proposed new system are outlined for the period up to December 31st 1998.