STRATEGIC GUIDANCE

Information Integrity: Forging a pathway to Truth, Resilience and Trust

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ENVISIONING COMPREHENSIVE AND EFFECTIVE RESPONSES TO INFORMATION POLLUTION

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Acknowledgements

Foreword

Access to reliable information is a necessary condition for well-governed and peaceful societies. We now live in a world where huge volumes of information spread quickly without checks or controls. A world where information is ranked based on its ability to grab attention, rather than its truth or accuracy. A world where it is easy to deceive and hard to know what information to trust. Information pollution has emerged as a deeply worrisome and hard-to-fix side effect of this new reality.

We agree wholeheartedly with the UN Secretary General's conclusion that information pollution is an "existential risk to humanity". This is a global problem. It impedes our ability to address the immense global challenges now facing us: violent conflict, democratic backsliding, the climate emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, to name a few.

Across the world, we have seen information pollution wreak all kinds of havoc on political and social norms and values. It undermines the social contract and erodes trust in democratic processes and institutions. It is a potent catalyst of conflict and division, sometimes to explosive effect. It prevents informed decision-making and collective agreement on truth and fact.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is deeply concerned about the impact of information pollution on the 2030 Agenda. When our collective development efforts are being undermined by the spread of false and misleading information, we are obliged to respond. Under UNDP's 2022-25 Strategic Plan, we will redouble our efforts to protect and promote access to reliable information on issues of public concern. This includes countering information pollution in all its forms.

We commend our UNDP colleagues and partners in all parts of the world who are already using creative approaches to tackle information pollution. UNDP is committed to ensure that these efforts are benefiting from new thinking, digital innovation and strategic partnerships.

This *Strategic Guidance on Information Integrity* is an important resource to guide our efforts. It provides an analytic framework to help unpack the complexities of information pollution in different contexts. It also offers guiding principles and programmatic options. Our hope is that it can assist UNDP teams and partners to better understand the challenges faced and to develop innovative and impactful responses.

Our thanks to those who have contributed to its development through various consultations. We encourage you to read and incorporate the guidance into your work and share with partners. The reality is that we will be dealing with information pollution for the foreseeable future. With the help of this strategic guidance paper, we can reduce its impacts and help build an open and conducive public sphere that enables inclusive, just and peaceful societies.

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Table of Contents

I.   Introduction

1.1 Purpose

Information integrity and associated concepts are relatively new to UNDP's lexicon. It is therefore important to develop internal clarity as to what this area of work entails, why it is important to UNDP and how it can translate into programming. This strategic guidance is intended to provide coherence both strategically and programmatically.

At the strategic level, the document explores information integrity as it relates to UNDP's mandate and thematic areas of interest and provides a conceptual framework of terminology and definitions.

At the programmatic level, it provides practical guidance for context analysis and programme design. The aim is to support UNDP country, regional and thematic teams, and their partners, to develop effective responses to information pollution. It offers guiding principles, an analytical framework and a set of proposed programmatic outcomes and outputs.

As the challenge of information pollution is evolving at a rapid pace, this document will undergo periodic revision.

1.2 Context

Access to information is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of democracy and social cohesion. Goal 16 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[1] recognises the critical role of accurate and accessible information for effective governance and sustainable development. It enables people to make informed decisions, participate in democratic processes, and contribute to the building of inclusive, peaceful and just societies. Open and transparent information flows form the foundation of the social contract between people and their governments, building accountability, transparency and, ultimately, trust. Equal access to accurate information is a necessary condition for bridging social and political divides, fostering tolerance and collaboration, reducing stereotypes and prejudices and strengthening a sense of shared identity and social cohesion.

The internet has fundamentally changed the way in which information is created, distributed, and consumed. This creates incredible opportunities for increased access to information, freedom of expression and public participation. However, it also presents a new set of challenges for information ecosystems around the world. Much online content is channelled via internet platforms that earn most of their revenue through advertising services.[2] Information is automatically ranked to keep users engaged and connected, a model that favours sensationalist, emotive or divisive content over accuracy or editorial integrity. Anyone, including state, political and commercial actors, can exploit this business model to spread disinformation for financial, political, or ideological gain. Aided by engagement-driven algorithms, influencers, bots, and an emerging disinformation-for-hire sector[3], information pollution spreads far faster and farther than information from trustworthy and credible sources.[4] As a result, people are increasingly exposed to false, misleading, or manipulated information. Traditional news media and state institutions, the customary gatekeepers of information, are struggling to compete and to maintain public trust in this new information economy.[5] The combination of an overabundance of information and a high incidence of low-quality information reduces public ability to find and trust information. As more emerging digital societies join the online world, it can be assumed that this situation will only worsen.

1.3 Problem Analysis

Understanding and quantifying the individual and societal impacts of information pollution is challenging. However, there is growing evidence that information pollution can cause real harm, including democratic backsliding, human rights violations, violence and resistance to public policy.[6] It is detrimental to the functioning of democratic, inclusive, and peaceful societies.[7] This is true even in advanced digital societies with robust democratic institutions. The impact of information pollution on conflict-prone or fragile countries is less studied, yet potentially more alarming. Unsurprisingly, public concern about the impacts of information pollution

1 https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16.

2 How do the biggest internet companies make money?, Mozilla Internet Health Report, 2019.

3 Disinformation For Hire: How A New Breed Of PR Firms Is Selling Lies Online, Buzzfeed, Jan 6, 2020.

4 Dizikes, P, Study: On Twitter, false news travels faster than true stories, MIT News Office, March 8, 2018.

5 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, Edelman, 2021.

6 Kahn, Irene, Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, April 13, 2021, p. 2.

7 Colomina, Carme et al, The impact of disinformation on democratic processes and human rights in the world, European Parliament, 2021.

is also growing,[8] while the United Nations Secretary General has labelled it "an existential risk to humanity."[9] A global online consultation co-hosted by UNDP and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) collected perspectives from diverse contexts. It identified three common areas of concern:[10]

GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRACY

Information pollution is eroding public trust in state institutions, mainstream news media, and political actors and undermining government accountability. In contexts where levels of public trust in those institutions is already low, **vulnerability to information pollution** appears to be higher. The use of disinformation tactics by state actors themselves further contributes to delegitimising governments and their institutions in the eyes of the public. These tactics can also lead to unwarranted trust in leadership and government.

The quantity and virality of information pollution often increase during **political processes** such as elections, formation of government or high-profile parliamentary debates. This curtails public access to accurate information and thus informed decision-making. As a result, the **legitimacy of democratic processes is undermined, and public participation impacted**. Political actors can be both the victims and perpetrators of electoral disinformation campaigns.

Gendered disinformation, often fuelled by a gender equality backlash, targets female candidates, activists, elected officials and members of government. It has a **detrimental impact on women's rights to democratic participation, representation and leadership**, threatening gender equality gains and weakening democratic representation.[11]

More broadly, information pollution **degrades public discourse**. It impacts both the quality of the debate, through divisive discourse, and the issues being discussed, as fringe concerns and polarised views are amplified through disinformation.

SOCIAL COHESION

Disinformation is being used as a strategy to drive **political and social polarisation at all levels**, by amplifying existing fears and divisions and attacking or discrediting political opponents, vulernable groups, women and others. It rein-

forces polarising rhetoric and can turn public opinion against legitimate protest and civil society actors.

Information pollution can result i**n the further stigmatisation** of already marginalised groups. Even in relatively stable societies, there are fears of civil unrest or targeted attacks driven by disinformation. Groups which have historically faced discrimination are particularly vulnerable to this, as disinformation reinforces or amplifies existing prejudices.

FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The confusion and suspicion created by a polluted information landscape **curtails access to accurate, trustworthy and understandable information** by reducing public capacity to decipher fact from fiction. Heavy-handed regulatory responses can also have an impact on **freedom of expression and opinion** and can serve to **further reduce civic space** by targeting activists, journalists and critics and human rights-focused civil society actors.[12] Rights of minority groups and women's rights to participation in public life can also be infringed.

1.4 A Hard Problem to Solve

Most stakeholders would agree that addressing disinformation is a daunting task. It is difficult to know where to start and how. Below are some of the factors which contribute to that complexity, and which are useful to consider when assessing the feasibility of interventions.

Lack of international framework

There is currently no United Nations framework to guide UN action in this field and to communicate in a unified way to stakeholders, including internet companies and member states.[13] Unlike hate speech, there is no international law which governs issues related to information pollution.

Transparency and data

Accessing the data needed to measure the scale and scope of disinformation remains challenging. Internet companies do not provide sufficient access to researchers and other stakeholders to allow them to fully investigate the levels, sources and handling of information pollution.[14] Furthermore, research to date has been largely North America- and

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8   Ibid.

9   Our Common Agenda, Report of the Secretary General, United Nations, 2021, p. 27.

10   See the summary report of the global online consultation for more details.

11   Jankowicz, Nina et al, Malign Creativity: How Gender, Sex, and Lies Are Weaponized Against Women Online, The Wilson Center, January 25, 2021.

12   Freedom on the Net 2021, Freedom House, 2021.

13   Though there is growing momentum towards UN-led international cooperation as outlined in section 3.1.

14   Tackling misinformation: What researchers could do with social media data, Misinformation Review, Harvard Kennedy School, December 9, 2020.

Europe-focused. There is a dearth of evidence on how information pollution plays out in other contexts.[15]

Risk of compromise

Tackling disinformation inherently risks compromising the many positive features of new technologies and innovations in the information environment, which still play a crucial role in keeping people engaged, informed and connected. Fundamental rights to access to information, to freedom of expression and opinion and to press freedom need to be protected. This presents challenges for programming and policy work and requires that human rights are at the centre of any response. Guidance on how to effectively create a rights-based framework for these interventions is still nascent.[16]

Types of information pollution

Information pollution manifests itself in many different ways.[17] The motivation of content creators as well as the means of transmission also vary. Creating a single approach for addressing information pollution is therefore challenging. **What constitutes false, misleading or manipulated information is, in and of itself, a hugely challenging** and often subjective process which further complicates the conceptualising of the problem.

Multitude of stakeholders

There are initiatives led by a range of actors seeking to address information pollution. These include policy development, academic research, fact-checking, journalism training, and strategic communications. The issue of information pollution **does not fully sit within any one government ministry or UN agency mandate** and requires collaboration with civil society, media, private sector, researchers and others. It calls for **complex coordination and consultation** due to the pace of digital development, and the multidisciplinary and transnational nature of the problem and its potential solutions.

Role of state actors

Member States have found themselves largely on the backfoot in regard to policy solutions to information pollution. While technology advances constantly, legislative responses are slow to emerge, and difficult to enforce at the national level. Regulatory responses to disinformation at times contribute to a **shrinking civic space and diminished freedom of expression**. Laws aimed to counter disinformation can be weaponised by state and non-state actors against civil society activists, political opponents and media professionals in an effort to stifle opinion, limit free expression and delegitimise opposing views. Furthermore, a growing number of governments are now utilising organised information pollution tactics to pursue their own domestic or geopolitical agendas, including targeted disinformation campaigns.[18]

Layers of engagement

The concentration of online information flows within a few powerful internet platforms means that information pollution is inherently a global challenge, transcending national frontiers and regional and linguistic boundaries. As such, there is a clear role for **global engagement on effective and ethical governance of the online space**. Regional bodies such as the European Commission are also working to develop legislative and policy frameworks to provide oversight of various facets of the online sphere.[19] That being said, the nature and impact of information pollution is also highly context specific, determined by socio-political factors and local information landscapes, and Member States are increasingly endeavouring to address the issue at the national level through regulatory responses. However, evidence of the effectiveness of national-level legislative solutions has yet to emerge.[20]

15   Pasquetto, Irene V et al, Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression, Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2020, p. 63.

16   For a helpful assessment tool, see chapter 8 of Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression, Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2020.

17   Wardle, Claire, Fake news. It's complicated, First Draft News, February 16, 2017.

18   Bradshaw, Samantha et al, Industrialized Disinformation: 2020 Global Inventory of Organised Social Media Manipulation. Working Paper 2021.1. Oxford, UK, p. 2.

19   The European Democracy Action Plan is one recent initiative to specifically address disinformation.

20   Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression, Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2020, p. 109.

II.   Conceptual **Framework**

A standardised terminology related to this issue has yet to be agreed upon, and terms such as misinformation and disinformation are often used interchangeably. Other popularised terms, most notably "fake news", are unhelpful conflations of many different concepts. Given that "fake news" has also been co-opted by political actors to delegitimise unfavourable media, many researchers argue that it should not be used at all.[21] As the debate around terminology continues to evolve, the umbrella term used in this paper is "information pollution". The below definitions of this and other key concepts can provide clarity for internal and external purposes.

2.1 Definitions

INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Information ecosystems are "complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators, and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows."[22] A functioning information ecosystem facilitates the flow of timely, accurate and comprehensible information between all members of society, fosters reasoned public discourse around that information and enables freedom of expression and opinion. The way in which information is created, distributed, accessed, and understood within information ecosystems depends largely on context. Information ecosystems are shaped by the broader technological, cultural, social and political environments within which they exist.

INFORMATION INTEGRITY

The concept of information integrity is borrowed from corporate systems, where it refers to information security and data protection within enterprises. Applied more broadly, information integrity is determined by **"the accuracy, consistency, and reliability of the information content, processes and systems to maintain a healthy information ecosystem."[23]** It

requires citizen access to trustworthy, balanced and complete information on current affairs, government actions, political actors and other elements relevant to their political perceptions and decision-making.[24]

INFORMATION POLLUTION

Information pollution refers to **verifiably false, misleading and manipulated content on- and offline, which is created, produced and disseminated intentionally or unintentionally, and which has the potential to cause harm**. Information pollution can be categorised as:

1. **Disinformation:** Information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country.

2. **Misinformation:** Information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.

3. **Mal-information:** Information that is based on real facts, but manipulated to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country.[25]

2.2 Related Concepts

HATE SPEECH

Hate speech is defined as "any kind of communication in speech, writing or behaviour that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender or other identity factor".[26] Information pollution and hate speech are frequently deployed together as part of a strategy to target an individual or group. As such, it is important to consider how they interact and reinforce each other. However, responses to hate speech are governed by international and, in many cases, national law, in a way that information pollution is not. While the present guidance does not specifically focus on responses to hate speech, there are certainly intervention areas which may effectively

21   Horowitz, Minna, Public Service Media and Information Disorder, Center for Media, Data and Society Central European University, August 2018, p. 6.

22   Why Information Matters, a Foundation for Resilience, Internews, 2015.

23   What is Information Integrity?, Yonder, January 28, 2019.

24   Protecting Information Integrity: National and International Policy Options, Club de Madrid, November 2018.

25   Adapted from Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking, Wardle, C, Derakhshan, H, Council of Europe, 2017.

26   United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech, 2019, p. 2.

address both hate speech and information pollution. These synergies can be identified by cross-referencing against the *UN Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech*[27], but include, for example, monitoring and analysing trends and patterns, engaging with new and traditional media, convening relevant actors and using new technologies. In as much as both hate speech and information pollution co-exist and reinforce each other on a particular issue or within a particular context, initiatives should preferably be designed to tackle both simultaneously.

PROPAGANDA

As in the case of hate speech, the line between propaganda and information pollution can be blurred. In its purest sense, propaganda is an orchestrated campaign which uses persuasive communication techniques to influence public opinion on an ideological, political or commercial issue. However, information pollution is frequently used as a tactic by unscrupulous actors and can form part of the propaganda arsenal. Strategically placed information pollution can reinforce the impact of other propaganda techniques. According to the Broadband Commission, "the merging of propaganda techniques and disinformation can be a strategy to move away from the use of patently false content in favour of using decontextualised, manipulative, and misleading content in order to distort the information ecosystem."[28] The responses to information pollution driven by propaganda goals may differ from other approaches and may require strategic engagement with relevant political and ideological actors, as well as appropriate policy responses.

27 Ibid, pp. 3-4.

28 Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation While Respecting Freedom of Expression, Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, 2020, p. 30.

III. UNDP's Role in Promoting Information Integrity

3.1 UN Engagement

Across the United Nations system and among Member States, attention to the dangers of information pollution is mounting, driven partly by the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2020, the United Nations Secretary-General launched the Verified initiative,[29] aimed at creating an online community of activists to increase the volume and reach of trusted, accurate information about COVID-19. In June 2020, over 130 Member States and territories endorsed a call to all stakeholders at global, regional, and national levels to fight COVID 19 disinformation in order to build a "healthier, more equitable, just and resilient world".[30] The Secretary-General's 2020 Roadmap for Digital Cooperation[31] further highlights the risks posed by disinformation to political processes, as well as to human rights activists, journalists and other targeted groups. It also voices concerns about government responses which are not in accordance with international human rights law, such as internet blackouts. These concerns were echoed in the 2020 study by the Broadband Commission for Sustainable Development, *Balancing Act: Countering Digital Disinformation while respecting Freedom of Expression,* which lays out the threats to freedom of expression and the need for responses which respect international human rights law.[32]

In 2021, momentum and focus within the UN system continued with the release of *Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression,*[33] a report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, and of the United Nations Secretary-General's *Our Common Agenda* report. The latter highlights the importance of UN involvement to produce accurate information, support independent media and develop a "global code of conduct that promotes integrity in public information".[34] In November 2021, a draft resolution[35] was approved by the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly urging social media companies to review their business models and ensure that their business operations are compliant with international human rights standards.[36]

3.2 Alignment to UNDP's Strategic Plan

Signature Solution Two on Governance in the UNDP 2022-2025 Strategic Plan[37] supports the strengthening of democratic institutions and processes for an inclusive and open public sphere with expanded public engagement. The Integrated Results and Resources Framework makes a specific link between that ambition and this issue through indicator 2.4.5: Number of regional, national and sub-national initiatives, policies, and strategies to protect and promote *access to reliable information on issues of public concern*. Initiatives that reduce the impact of information pollution contribute to this indicator.

Other indicators may also be relevant depending on the context, including but not limited to:

UNDER OUTPUT 2. OF THE GOVERNANCE SIGNATURE SOLUTION:

2.4.1 Number of countries with Electoral Management Bodies with **strengthened capacity to conduct inclusive, peaceful and credible elections.**

UNDER OUTPUT 3.2 OF THE RESILIENCE SIGNATURE SOLUTION:

3.2.2 Number of cross-border, regional, national, sub-national and community-based organisations with capacities for **community resilience to address psychosocial support, hate speech and information pollution.**

UNDER ENABLERS:

E.1.1 Number of policies, strategies and laws that promote **enabling and regulated digital ecosystems that are affordable, accessible, trusted, and secure.**

29 https://shareverified.com/

30 Mauritius, Senegal, South Africa among authors of global call against COVID-19 'infodemic', UN News, June 22, 2020.

31 Report of the Secretary-General Roadmap for Digital Cooperation, UN, June 2020.

32 See the full report.

33 Kahn, Irene, Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, April 13, 2021.

34 Our Common Agenda, Secretary General's Report, UN, 2021, p. 27.

35 Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, UN, November 10, 2021.

36 Third Committee Approves 13 Drafts on Preventing Disinformation, Crime, UN press, November 15, 2021.

37 https://strategicplan.undp.org/

3.3 UNDP's Added Value

Information pollution is distorting public perceptions of critical political and development issues. If not adequately addressed across multiple development lsectors, including elections, climate change, conflict prevention, health and others, it will present an even greater challenge to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. As such, UNDP has a critical role to play through its mandate to promote effective, inclusive, and accountable governance, respect for human rights, and protection of vulnerable populations. It is in UNDP's best interest to understand how to effectively intervene in this issue.

UNDP's focus on many "lightning rod" issues, including climate change, elections, peacebuilding, and crisis management has meant that tackling information pollution has been required to achieve objectives in other programme areas. As a result, there have been significant efforts over the years to address this issue at the country and regional levels. Recent internal mappings confirm a sizeable investment in information integrity, hate speech prevention and media initiatives[38] managed by UNDP country offices across all regions. UNDP's network of Accelerator Labs is engaged in developing and testing innovative solutions to information pollution, including gamification[39] and crowdsourcing.[40] At the regional level, UNDP has invested substantially in research to map information pollution, understand its impact, and identify effective solutions and partners.

Driven by this growing interest at country and regional level, UNDP now has several global teams working and collaborating internally on this issue. This includes research, monitoring, strategic guidance, partnership building, and external visibility,[41] as well as digital solutions and partnerships to support Country Offices to manage information pollution.[42]

This puts UNDP in a unique position to distil and elevate learning and best practice across different contexts to global conversations and forums, bringing voices from communities, journalists, activists, political actors, government institutions, youth, women and others from across the globe to these important discussions.

❚ 38   UNDP's Engagement with the Media for Governance, Sustainable Development and Peace, UNDP, May 13, 2020.

❚ 39   Singh, Rozita et al, The Learning Network Effect: Gamification to counter COVID-19 Misinformation, UNDP, January 26, 2021.

❚ 40   Upender, A and Reints, R, Tackling digital misinformation with the Healthy Internet Project, UNDP, January 29, 2021.

❚ 41   See Oslo Governance Centre for details.

❚ 42   The elections team, in collaboration with the Chief Digital Office, has developed iVerify, an online platform to detect and report elections-related hate speech and information pollution.

IV. Guiding Principles

These guiding principles are intended to familiarise UNDP and partners with some core values to apply to programme and policy work in this field, as well as with considerations which can reduce the risks associated with information integrity initiatives.

l **Human rights-based:** The risk of policy responses violating basic human rights has become apparent in recent years as more national governments make efforts to address information pollution. Legislation which aims to curb disinformation can be weaponised to silence government opponents, activists, journalists and dissenting voices. Vague and unclear legal definitions of what constitutes disinformation can lead to the curtailing of legitimate speech. UNDP must anchor its efforts in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

l **Partnerships and collaboration:** As an emerging issue of global concern, and one which involves a multitude of stakeholders and actors, addressing information pollution is a challenging task which can only be accomplished by building strong partnerships at all levels and maintaining a spirit of open collaboration and sharing of best practice, research and innovations. This ranges from engaging with global platforms and forums to supporting civil society organisations that possess important local expertise, knowledge and solutions.

l **Evidence-based:** The research agenda surrounding information integrity is relatively new and has focused mainly on the United States and European contexts. Supporting context-specific research and mapping of the information ecosystem is a critical step to develop effective responses and engage appropriate actors.

l **Comprehensive, scalable responses:** Just as the root causes of information pollution are many and diverse, effective programme and policy responses must be comprehensive and aim to affect change at several levels and within numerous stakeholder groups. Responses should integrate both online and offline components and recognise that internet-driven challenges may require offline solutions. Scalability requires engaging partners across multiple sectors from the outset who can collaborate to identify and overcome obstacles to mass adoption of effective responses.

l **Gender equality and women's rights:** The ways in which women experience information pollution, as well as their potential role as information integrity champions, must also be explored and recognised in any initiative. Gendered information pollution has a particularly insidious impact on representations and perceptions of female politicians, leaders and activists. These dynamics must be clearly understood and addressed through participatory design and programming.

l **Conflict sensitivity:** Information pollution is often used to exacerbate existing social and political fractures and exert political influence. Applying a Do No Harm-approach is also necessary to ensure that responses are not inadvertently contributing to heightening tensions and fragmenting or endangering groups and individuals further. These analyses should be systematically conducted before and throughout the programme cycle.

l **Grounded in Political analysis:** Information pollution is often a game of power and influence. Disinformation serves larger political aims and ambitions. The underlying power dynamics that drive information pollution can also hinder efforts to address it. At a minimum, an awareness of those dynamics will ensure that interventions are realistic in their aspirations. A thorough analysis may also reveal points in the political landscape which are open to influence and change, thus enhancing the impact of interventions.

V. Analytical Framework

The enablers, drivers and consequences of information pollution are inherently intertwined with other factors in the political, media, social and legislative environments. The enablers are those conditions and actors which indirectly facilitate information pollution, while drivers are the factors which contribute directly to the production, spread and consumption of information pollution. The causes and consequences of information pollution can be seen as cyclical and self-reinforcing. They influence the wider context in ways that create short- and long-term vulnerabilities. It is partly this complexity and the interlinkage of cause and consequence which have created challenges for those engaging in this field.
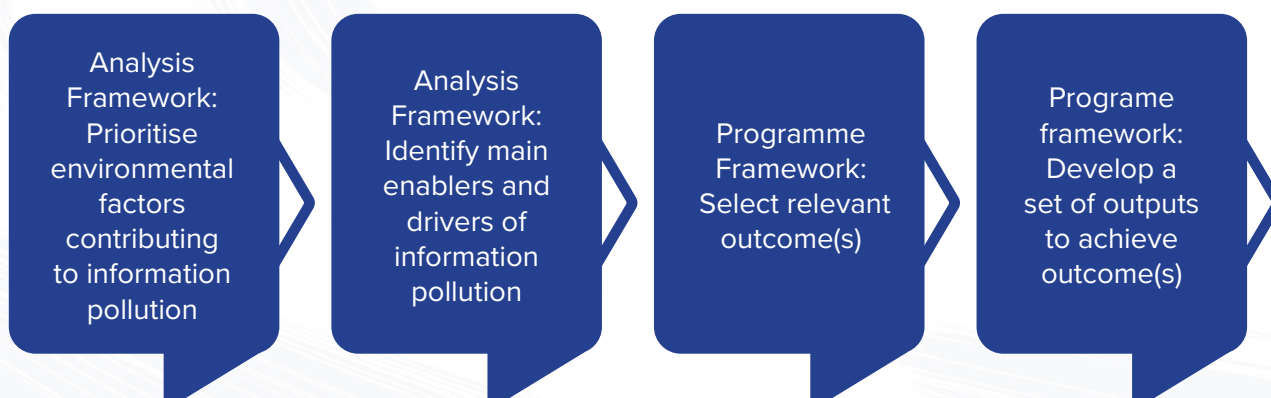
Understanding these linkages and potential entry points to effectively address information pollution is becoming increasingly important for UNDP's focus on sustainable development, accountable, inclusive and effective governance and peacebuilding. The below analytical framework, while not exhaustive nor fully applicable to every context, provides some of the key considerations and warning signs which can assist UNDP teams and partners to understand the extent to which information pollution poses a risk to programme impact. The political, media, social and internet landscapes all contribute in different and

complex ways to societal vulnerability to information pollution and taking time to analyse the local context remains a critical first step.

5.1 How to Use the Framework

The framework can be applied to help determine which enablers and drivers of disinformation are most significant in a given context. It can be particularly useful during project design or proposal development processes to guide the problem analysis and to help identify the most prominent causes of information pollution on a given issue and their potential impacts.

The framework consists of four environmental components to analyse: 1) political, 2) media and internet, 3) social and 4) legislative. Each of these components contains possible enablers, drivers and impacts of information pollution. Each component has a corresponding outcome in the Programme Framework in Chapter 6, with a range of programmatic outputs to choose from. By identifying which drivers and enablers are relevant and prioritising the most influential, it is possible to identify points of entry which address the root causes of information pollution and are therefore more impactful programmatically.

Analysis Framework: Prioritise environmental factors contributing to information pollution

Analysis Framework: Identify main enablers and drivers of information pollution

Programme Framework: Select relevant outcome(s)

Programe framework: Develop a set of outputs to achieve outcome(s)

Environment	Enablers	Drivers	Vulnerability	Impact of information pollution
Political landscape	l Low public trust in state institutions and political actors l Exclusionary political discourse l Prevalence of identity-based groups/politics l Populist regime or rhetoric	l Political processes (e.g. elections, referenda) l Political crises (e.g. disputed elections, unconstitutional power transfer) l State or political actors engaged in influence operations l Government restricting access to information	l Reduced public trust in official information sources l Reduced public trust in political actors and institutions	l Degradation of the public debate l Reduced citizen participation l Reduced women's participation in politics and public office l Delegitimized democratic processes l Long term damage to social contracts and vertical social cohesion l Decreased government accountability and transparency l Reduced buy-in for public policies
Media and information landscape	l No independent public service broadcaster l Lack of media plurality or neutrality l Media closures or downsizing l Poor quality journalism l Lack of transparency of media/website ownership	l Limited press freedom due to government- or self-censorship l Hyper-partisan or highly politicised media l Prevalence of junk news sites l Targeting of mainstream media by disinformation actors l Increased reliance on closed messaging apps, groups and platforms for news and information l Prevalence of coordinated disinformation campaigns	l Reduced trust in mainstream news and information l Reduced quality of information and news l Certain populations not adequately served by news/media outlets l Mainstream media amplifies information pollution	l Reduced public access to accurate and reliable news l Increased use of alternative information sources l Spread of junk news stories on- and offline

Environment	Enablers	Drivers	Vulnerability	Impact of information pollution
Social landscape	ı Prevalence of inter-group tensions and identity-based politics ı Highly polarised or divisive public discourse ı Low media and internet literacy levels ı Cultural norms allow unchecked information sharing ı Misogynistic or hyper-nationalist narratives	ı Divisive discourse around migrants, refugees and other vulnerable groups ı Online/offline influencers (political, social, religious, etc.) creating or amplifying disinformation ı Targeting of activists, journalists, human rights observers, etc. through media and online ı Social unrest or violence ı Prevalence of online harassment of women or minority groups	ı Manipulation of information for political or ideological purposes ı Low public awareness of disinformation and its risks ı Low public capacity to verify information ı Echo chambers ı Reinforced stereotypes and prejudices	ı Heightened political and social polarization or radicalisation ı Marginalisation and stigmatization of vulnerable groups ı Increased risk of communal violence ı Increased gender-targeted trolling, harassment and cyberviolence ı Stifling of activists and opposition voices ı Long-term degradation of horizontal social cohesion
Legislative/ internet oversight landscape	ı Ineffective or repressive disinformation legislation ı Lack of transparency and accountability of internet companies ı Lack of public dialogue on issues related to internet governance ı Lack of incentives for internet companies to curb disinformation ı Lack of consistency in content curation policies between internet companies	ı Social media algorithms promoting sensational content ("click bait") creating financial incentives ı No independent body tasked with online content oversight ı Inconsistent enforcement of policies by internet companies ı Government interference in online space, e.g., internet shutdowns	ı Elevation of disinformation on social media platforms ı Slow, ineffective moderation of content ı Ill-intentioned actors continue to profit from creating and disseminating disinformation	ı Regulation curtailing right to information, freedom of expression and opinion ı Legislation restricting civic space and dissenting voices ı Growth of "disinformation industry"

VI. Programme Framework
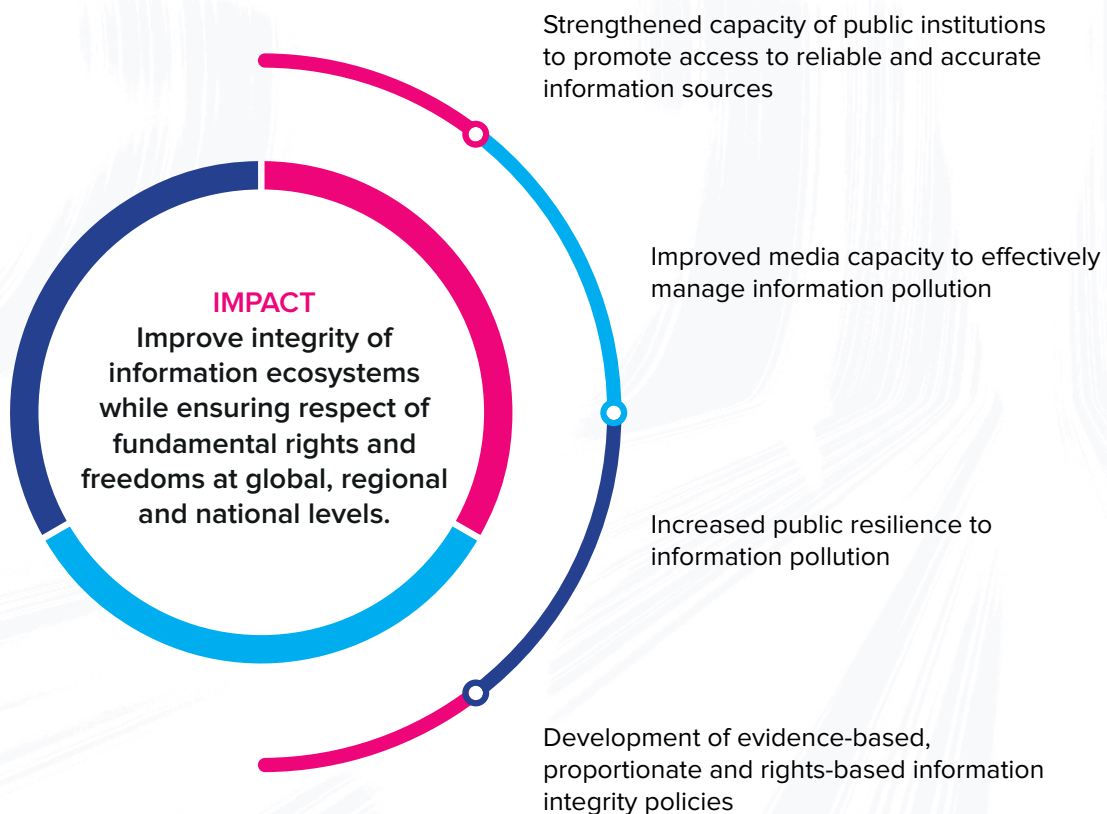
6.1 A Preventive Approach

Vulnerabilities in the information ecosystem are exacerbated during "flashpoint" events, as starkly illustrated by the massive increase in information pollution across the globe during the COVID-19 pandemic.[43] Information pollution can significantly hamper the ability to respond to crises by perpetuating dangerous rumours, undermining official crisis communication efforts, and creating panic and confusion. Events such as elections, political or social conflict, natural disasters, and refugee flows which create spikes of information pollution require immediate responses. Managing information pollution is an important component of any crisis response strategy. Options for short-term approaches can be found in the 2020 UNDP information pollution guidance note.

However, in order to effectively reduce the impact of information pollution, long-term, preventive responses are also needed to encourage public trust in and access to official information sources, support the media to effectively tackle disinformation, build public resilience and ensure effective and rights-based policy responses. This can take the form of stand-alone programmes or integration of information pollution components into other thematic programming (health, climate change, elections, media support, preventing violent extremism (PVE), etc.).

6.2 Designing Effective Responses

This framework provides guidance for programming, to encourage a coherent approach across the organisation through a set of shared overarching objectives. This will in turn enable more effective learning and exchange, and more consistent and deliberate monitoring of impact and results, including shared indicators. The outcomes and outputs suggested below can be adapted to suit the context.

IMPACT
Improve integrity of information ecosystems while ensuring respect of fundamental rights and freedoms at global, regional and national levels.

Strengthened capacity of public institutions to promote access to reliable and accurate information sources

Improved media capacity to effectively manage information pollution

Increased public resilience to information pollution

Development of evidence-based, proportionate and rights-based information integrity policies

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43   Stop the virus of disinformation: the risk of malicious use of social media during COVID-19 and the technology options to fight it, United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, November 2020, pp. 1-3.

Strengthened capacity of public institutions to promote access to reliable and accurate information sources

OUTPUT OPTIONS

- Build government capacity to communicate effectively with the public on- and offline, including by designing and implementing inclusive public communication and engagement strategies.
- Support mechanisms for ongoing government-citizen dialogue from local to national level on disinformation "hot topics".
- Build capacity of key public institutions – including government authorities, electoral management boards,

parliaments, etc. – to detect and effectively respond to flashpoint instances of disinformation.
- Support the building of coalitions and alliances between public institutions, media, internet companies, civil society and others to develop multi-sectorial strategies to address disinformation.
- Promote and monitor adherence to codes of conduct/ethical pacts between political actors or parties

CASE STUDY

In **Zambia**, UNDP rolled out a technical solution and support to identify, analyse, and counter disinformation during electoral periods. iVerify has at its core an online monitoring and fact-checking platform. It is intended to allow for ongoing, real-time identification of, and response to, harmful content online.

UNDP is collaborating with electoral administrations in **the Arab region** on social media management, including the development of electronic platforms to support electoral administrations to fight disinformation and to increase their capabilities to analyse social media content.

Improved media capacity to effectively manage information pollution

- Support and build capacity of journalists, editors, and other media professionals to detect and manage information pollution.
- Support and build capacity of journalists to investigate and report on disinformation campaigns and actors.
- Equip journalists with tools and resources to address information pollution, such as fact-checking platforms and source-checking hubs.
- Provide institutional and technical support to improve quality of public broadcasters and independent and community media.

- Strengthen media and journalism standards through coalition-building, codes of conduct, etc., and gender-sensitive and conflict-sensitive journalism.
- Engage media regulatory bodies, journalism unions and other professional bodies to ensure effective, rights-based, and collaborative regulation of online and traditional media.
- Support collaborative reporting between media outlets during political processes and other "flashpoint" events.

CASE STUDY

In **Sierra Leone and Uruguay**, UNDP has provided training to journalists on how to deal with disinformation in the newsroom, to avoid amplifying fake stories and to effectively debunk false information.

In **Bolivia**, UNDP is strengthening the democratic role of the media during elections through a „media for democracy" network of resources, so the media become contributors to constructive dialogue before, during, and after electoral process.

OUTPUT OPTIONS

Increased public resilience to information pollution

- Support research to understand the impact of information pollution on social cohesion, public trust and other critical areas of peacebuilding and democratic governance, and to develop rights-based intervention models.

- Create and support monitoring systems to track information trends and patterns to strengthen government, media, UN, private sector, and civil society responses.

- Develop media and internet literacy initiatives and policies, including as part of education curricula and with a focus on youth and innovation.

- Strengthen the quality (including neutrality, reach and financial viability) of initiatives to flag and fact-check harmful content online and in news media.

- Develop strategic communication campaigns to raise awareness about information pollution tactics and risks, particularly amongst youth, women, and marginalised groups.

- Include resilience-building activities in larger programmes addressing social cohesion, elections and other key thematics.

- Couple online strategic communication campaigns with offline community-based dialogue and awareness raising.

- Engage with individuals with influence on- and offline (community leaders, artists, political leaders, religious leaders, etc.) to promote authoritative and accurate information to their constituencies.

CASE STUDY

In **Guinea Bissau**, UNDP supported the creation of the country's first fact-checking platform to address COVID-19 disinformation.

In **Somalia**, UNDP engaged religious leaders to promote accurate information about COVID-19 and to warn of the dangers of spreading disinformation.

In **Lebanon**, UNDP Lebanon launched the Count to Ten campaign to promote critical thinking and public awareness of the risks of disinformation.

Development of evidence-based, proportionate and rights-based information integrity policies

- Convene and facilitate the engagement of stakeholders across all levels (policy makers, civil society, media, community-based actors, internet companies, women's organisations, human rights activists, etc.) to develop common understanding and analysis and shared solutions to information integrity challenges.

- Provide human-rights focused policy support and advice to government and civil society partners on issues related to data privacy and disinformation.

- Support government partners to develop appropriate rights-based legislation to address organised and orchestrated disinformation campaigns.

- Engage national human rights institutions, and women's rights and minority advocacy groups to explore and advise on human rights considerations in information integrity and policy reforms.

- Advocate for legislation to ensure transparency of political advertising/campaigning.

- Engage at the global level in coordination, dialogue and advocacy for effective tackling of disinformation by the UN, Member States, regional bodies and internet companies.

CASE STUDY

In **Bangladesh**, UNDP supports ongoing online and offline monitoring of extremism, hate speech, and disinformation, making data available to government institutions and other partners to support the development of evidence-based policy responses.

In **Ukraine**, UNDP's information pollution research has revealed important trends on how COVID19 disinformation is circulating. UNDP has issued recommendations to the government and others to strengthen the national response.

VII. Other Considerations

7.1 Design, Monitoring & Evaluation

Like any intervention, information pollution programming needs to be designed, monitored and evaluated for short-term, intermediary and, when possible, long-term impact. However, it is a particularly hard-to-measure issue.[44] Effective methods of impact assessment have, to date, been slow to emerge, and there are not yet any robust and well-tested monitoring and evaluation frameworks or theories of change to apply to this work. Even the concept of accurate information poses challenges. While certain information can be verified as objective truth, it is not always clear cut and opinions can differ, even amongst specialists, as to what constitutes information pollution. Relevant data is not easy to access from social media platforms. Normative changes, for example in levels of public trust, are difficult to measure over standard project life cycles, and require long-term focussed engagement.

Despite these challenges, indeed because of them, it is crucial to integrate monitoring and evaluation into any initiative. As this field emerges and develops, all efforts can contribute to collective learning and help to improve our understanding of what works and why. It is recommended that projects and programmes:

Define the problem we want to solve: Tackling information pollution will look different depending on the context, producers, motivation, and impact. For example, politically motivated elections-related disinformation may have a different set of stakeholders and responses compared to conspiracy-theory driven anti-vaccination disinformation.

Be realistic about the kind of change that is feasible and achievable within the timeframe and scope of a programme: Improving a society's resilience to information pollution requires long-term investment. Developing intermediary outcomes which demonstrate incremental advancement towards a more ambitious impact is important. Sustained normative shifts such as increased trust in institutions or the media are not feasible short-term outcomes.

Be clear about where we want to see change: As with many communication-oriented initiatives, there is a risk of targeting too widely. Identify primary and secondary beneficiaries and stakeholders and focus programming and monitoring efforts on those groups.

Measure beyond the output level: It is relatively easy to track levels of engagement with online and offline content. But likes, shares, audience levels, etc., do not necessarily indicate meaningful change. It is important to look beyond the output level and develop indicators for desired outcomes and impact.

Be iterative: Monitoring can provide important indications as to the success or appropriateness of a particular approach. Use this data to regularly reflect on and implement any changes or adaptations needed to enhance the programme's impact.

7.2 Partnerships and Resources

Given the complex nature of information pollution, the diverse ways in which it manifests itself, and the associated risks to human rights, it is particularly important to be able to bring multiple stakeholders around the table to develop proportionate, effective, and rights-based solutions. This requires expertise from within and outside UNDP, and strategic partnerships are critical at all levels.

Some commonly-sought expertise includes:

- Media development and journalism training
- Strategic communications
- Media production and online content development
- Software development and digital solutions
- Research and monitoring
- Fact-checking
- Media and internet literacy
- Policy development

A developing database of organisations working in this field, as well as reports, toolkits, research and other resources related to information integrity, can be found at this link: https://airtable.com/shrrOu6Iggz0e8wtr. These databases will be further updated throughout 2022.

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44 See https://impact.gfmd.info/meetings/disinformation/evaluating-counter-disinformation-programmes for resources and guidance on monitoring and evaluating countering disinformation initiatives.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in nearly 170 countries and territories, we offer a global perspective and local insights to help empower lives and build resilient nations.

UNDP's Oslo Governance Centre (OGC) works closely with UNDP central and regional bureaus in New York headquarters and other relevant United Nations (UN) bodies to strengthen the overall analytical and learning ability in the area of governance and peacebuilding.