

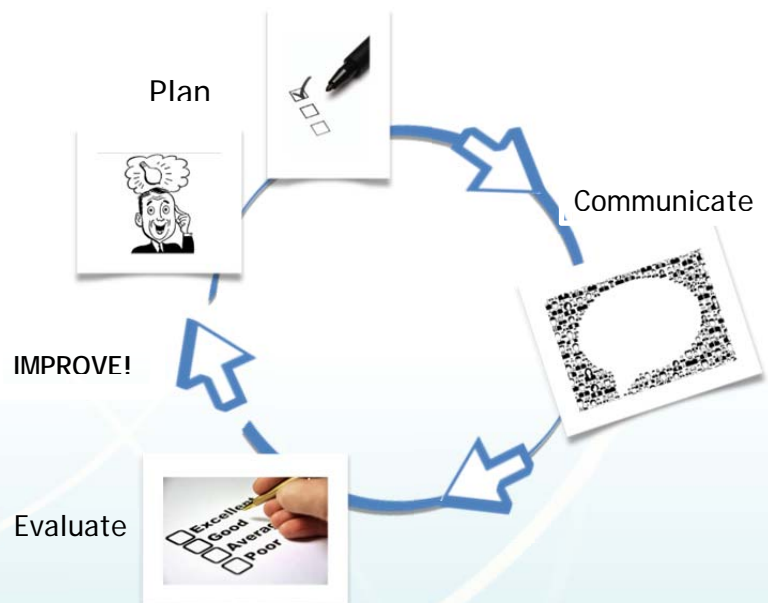
ENRD Seminar on Communicating Rural Development Workshop 2: Effectiveness of Communication Tools

Summary Report

Rationale – why the topic is important

Communicating *per se* is simply not sufficient. As any other activity which requires strategic thinking, decision, planning and implementation, communication actions and tools needs to be assessed in terms of what the immediate results are and – in the longer term – the impact they produces. Eventually, lessons learnt on failures and successes can inform what we can do better in the future. The need to evaluate communication actions is well recognised among rural development practitioners, but principles and practices are probably less well known. In fact, there is no so much cumulated knowledge and experience which to learn from.

The scope of the workshop was to highlight existing practices and practical approaches about how to go with “evaluating communication”. A number of concrete examples from the EU, the national and the local level were presented and shared among the participants in order to discuss possible difficulties and solutions and, ideally, inspire actions and a renovated interest towards getting the most out of rural development communication.



Speakers and contributions

The workshop consisted in two sessions in each of which three different experiences were presented. The morning session focused on approaches towards evaluating communication actions from the EU, national and the local perspective. In the afternoon session national cases were proposed which highlighted evaluation approaches and results.

Morning session:

Annette Hurrelmann has been working in the European Commission, Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), since 2006. She started in the Agricultural Policy Analysis and Perspectives unit and currently works as evaluation officer in the Evaluation and Studies unit.

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Focus of the presentation: Key concepts of the evaluations prepared and managed by DG AGRI with a particular focus on the elements that need to be addressed when evaluating information/communication actions on the CAP.

Alistair Prior has led the rural communities team in the Scottish Government for almost three years with responsibility for driving rural communities policy, leading the Scottish National Rural Network and managing the Scottish LEADER programme. He previously worked on a range of related rural development themes in government including: short supply chains, organics, PFNs, seafood, aquaculture, land use planning. **Focus of the presentation:** Overview of the lessons learnt from the evaluation of the Scottish National Rural Network and Scottish Rural Development Programme's Communications Plan.

Linus Zabaliunas has 10 years of practical experience in inbound tourism and is the President of the Lithuanian Countryside Tourism Association, an independent organisation with over 400 members involved in rural tourism. **Focus of the presentation:** An overview of the development and current situation of the rural tourism sector in Lithuania, identifying the importance of information communications technology (ICT) in communicating rural tourism.

Afternoon session:

Aistė Mileikaitė is the Head of Public Relations Sub-unit of the Lithuanian National Paying Agency. Her responsibilities include planning and delivering public relations campaigns on rural development implemented by the National Paying Agency. **Focus of the presentation:** The experience of the Lithuanian National Paying Agency in measuring the effectiveness of public information campaign on the 2007-2013 Rural Development Programme, methods used and lessons learned.

Annukka Lyra has been working for the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Finland since 2008. Her field of expertise is communicating rural development. She has worked as communication officer at Finnish Rural Policy Committee. She is head of communication team which coordinates the communication of RDP for Mainland Finland. **Focus of the presentation:** The evaluation of RDP communication in Finland, strengths and areas where communication needed to improve, use of results and planning communication actions for 2014-2020.

Participants

On average the workshops attracted some 30 people in each session, mostly from National Rural Networks and national administrations (Managing Authorities and Paying Agencies), but counting also representatives from the EC, Local Action Groups and other stakeholders such as organisations and communication experts.



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Interestingly, while almost all participants were involved to different extent in communication actions, very few among them had hands-on experience on evaluation.

Concept questions and key points discussed

- *What is “effective communication”?*

Effective communication means different things to different people, according to the role they play, their priorities, their experience. This was confirmed by a simple ice-breaker exercise in which participants of the morning session were asked to give a meaning to “effective communication” and share their views. The results of this brainstorming were collected, discussed and brought to the afternoon session for more feedback.



What “effective communication” means to the participants, in summary:

- Delivering the right message to the right people
- Communicating in a clear, understandable way, based on common understanding
- Using the right tools (e.g. use of experts on the topic)
- Providing information at the right time
- Based on transparent decision making processes
- Establishing a 2-way process: needs the involvement of and a response from the receiver
- Causing a change



All in all, communication in order to be effective must **deliver the right message** - expressed in a **clear and easy-to-understand way - at the right time**. In order to be 'right' the message needs to be appropriate to the receiver, therefore communication should be based on the **assessment of the different target groups' needs**. Furthermore effective communication should move generate from a **common understanding of the message**: only when the message is clearly stated and agreed (before the communication takes place) it is possible to assess whether it successfully reached the target group and achieved the expected result. Crucially **the meaning shall be shared between all 'who send the message'** so that it is also received without ambiguity.

It seemed clear from discussions that regardless of formal definitions, **communication is effective if it reaches the envisaged outcomes**. This might look obvious but strongly underlines the needs to clearly define objectives and expected outcomes right from the start!

“Communication that reaches a mutually agreed outcome is effective communication”
Alistair Prior, Scottish NSU

Effective communication is a **2-way process**. As it is expected to cause a “positive, tangible change” in the receiver it is crucial to **ask for feedback from receivers** in order to assess its effectiveness. Therefore evaluation should check whether the communication achieved and communicated the “mutually agreed messages and goals” set previously that the communication took place.

- *How do we evaluate the effectiveness of communication tools and actions?*

Evaluation is not one-off. It is a **long process** and should accompany the whole “communication campaign”: ex-ante, in order to clearly define the aims and what expected results to look for; on-going, ideally to provide continuous feedback from the audience and; ex-post in order to understand whether the expected outcomes are achieved and improve future policy campaigns.

It can be undertaken in many ways and it **doesn't necessarily need to be a very formal exercise**.

As communication happens through different means, also **different evaluation approaches** should be thought of (website analyses, on-line surveys, etc.). However this doesn't mean “reinventing the wheel” or designing complex evaluation approaches. A number of free tools are already available which can serve this purpose (e.g. Google analytics in order to monitor websites' performance). They need to be “discovered” and tailored to the specific evaluation needs.

- *How do we use the results of evaluation to improve communication tools and actions?*

Evaluation starts with **engaging receivers** in providing feedback. However promoting participation and engagement from the audience is not an easy task! The audience needs to be constantly updated and “reminded” about the importance of their feedback. On the other hand, the latter comes only when its usefulness is clear. In this respect it is crucial to publish the results of evaluation and make them accessible to those who are interested. **Transparency** is the key word. Evaluation undertaken within a transparent process reinforces communication efforts and **makes communication itself more trusted**.



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In other words, communicating the findings of evaluation motivate the audience to provide more feedback. Crucially, **evaluation efforts and feedback must be followed-up** and evaluation results need to generate changes where the evaluation showed areas for improvement. Only in this way, with time, people understand the importance of their opinions and therefore the number of feedbacks is likely to increase.

“Numbers are not a proof that your communication campaign is working” Ave Bremse, Estonian NSU

Conclusions

Evaluation is not just a formal exercise and doesn't necessarily need to be so. It is rather a continuous process for improving the way we communicate rural development and, moreover, a tool through which we can better engage with our stakeholders and promote mutual trust. In this respect, there shouldn't be any “fear” of negative feedbacks. The presentations provided the participants with inspiring tools and approaches that are likely to generate reflection and further sharing “at home”. More of such “good practices” would be needed and –as concretely suggested – ideally shared through a common platform.

Key lessons learned from participants

Some of the most important lessons learnt by participants are quoted below:

- Don't be afraid of negative feedback/evaluation.
- Evaluation of communication tools has to be part of the communication cycle.
- Don't reinvent the wheel – learn from others.
- Multi-level evaluation is essential.
- Use existing tools – Google analytics, surveys, questionnaires.
- Important elements are transparency and trust.
- Share the feedback and make it transparent.
- Use different evaluation tools to assess different actions.
- Follow-up of communication actions should be an integral part of the communications cycle.
- Evaluation should be part of the follow-up.
- Communication is always a two-way process.

Download link for presentations and videos

You can download the presentations and videos used in the session by clicking [here](#) and going to the “Outcomes” of the event.

