

This series of informative fiches aim to present, in summary, examples of practices and approaches that EU Member States and Regions have put in place in order to implement their rural development programmes (RDPs) in the current period. These examples want to contribute to the understanding of what has worked well and less well in the delivery of the 2007-2013 RDPs and as far as possible, draw lessons in the view of future improvement of the programmes.

N. 05

Definition and implementation of a communication strategy in France



Needs addressed

In France, the rural development programme (RDP) communication strategy pursues at the same time the provision of information to the general public and technical advice to beneficiaries. Communication actions need to address both intermediaries of EAFRD support and final beneficiaries, aim to enhance administrative capacity and, ultimately, serve the strategic approach of the French programme.



Key elements of the approach

The French communication approach is based on a range of tools addressing several target groups on different topics (available measures, eligibility/selection criteria) and at different territorial scales (regional, national, inter-communal). The system is centrally-designed, but decentralized in its implementation and receives continuous feedback from the regional level. The technical advice provided aims at making application procedures more user-friendly to both beneficiaries and local administrations.



Lessons learnt relevant for the future

The comprehensive French approach to communication has been positively assessed as improving administrative capacity, policy delivery and targeting. Ultimately it promotes the strategic priorities of the RDP. It is also relevant to the future orientations of rural development policy and could be further improved through specific action which aims to reduce the gaps between information needs and supply.



Context

A communication strategy aimed at potential RDP beneficiaries was put in place in France in order to facilitate their access to EAFRD funding and ultimately, the successful implementation of the RDP in the country. This communication strategy pursued two types of actions, namely: i) the provision of information to both the general public and potential beneficiaries of EAFRD and, ii) technical advice to potential beneficiaries and local administrations. The first action aimed to ensure that EU and national initiatives for rural development were widely known and understood. In parallel, it also targeted potential beneficiaries of EAFRD to raise their awareness on the full range of funding possibilities. Additionally, technical advice was channelled to potential beneficiaries to clarify the main elements of rural development support schemes and related operations.

The communication strategy in France is also justified from a strategic point of view. Administrative needs were addressed through the provision of information and technical support to institutions which or persons who operate as intermediaries of the EAFRD network. Through this action, the communication strategy aimed to support the efforts of these institutions and their staff in order to effectively promote rural development policy in the country. This was sought through empowering administrations in charge of RDP schemes and establishing a more productive working relationship with the beneficiaries. An interesting element included in this approach was the development of feedback mechanisms on policy delivery (for example, on the complexity of application procedures), which resulted in corrective actions on behalf of administrators. Such feedback is also promoted

through regional monitoring committees, which facilitate the direct exchange of information and experiences between beneficiaries and the administrations responsible for application procedures at the local territorial levels.

This communication effort facilitates the involvement of regional and local actors and administrators in the RDP implementation, improves –through feedback mechanisms- the targeting of interventions and ultimately, serves the strategic aims of rural development policy. The relevance of such an approach is also justified by the wide range of both private and public beneficiaries involved -which gives rise to different information and technical support needs- and by the existence of a semi-decentralised (central/regional) policy delivery environment, characterised by different needs, constraints and approaches in measures delivery.

The RDP communication strategy in France pursued a twofold objective: providing information both to the general public and potential beneficiaries and, providing technical advice to potential beneficiaries and administrations involved in the delivery of the rural development programme. Strategically, it aimed to improve the effectiveness of the RDP delivery system and also targeting of interventions.





The communication and information strategy

The French communication and information strategy was comprehensively supported by various tools such as national and local web sites, information material (leaflets, brochures, etc.), articles and press files, web presentation of examples of projects, seminars and briefings and media advertising. Information to the general public was provided through advertisements and multimedia campaigns. Tailored documents were conceived and developed to address specific target groups of potential beneficiaries (e.g. farmers/non-farmers) on different topics (e.g. available measures, information on eligibility/selection criteria, or specific axes, etc.). Information needs of institutions and public officials involved in RDP delivery were also addressed through dedicated meetings and events.

Since agricultural actors are generally well-informed through their professional networks, communication campaigns primarily addressed non-farm beneficiaries, i.e. persons or institutions which work as intermediaries in the policy delivery process (leaders of rural communities, presidents of inter-communal collectives, chambers, mayors, etc.).

The French communication strategy was pursued through a wide range of tools targeting both the general public, intermediate institutions and beneficiaries. These tools were produced at the national, regional and inter-communal levels. The strategy and tools were coordinated by a national plan; however, at the regional level, a certain flexibility was allowed to adjust communication efforts and means according to the needs.

Communication tools are produced at and for different territorial scales, namely, national, regional and inter-community levels while the design and coordination of the process stayed at the central level. A national communication plan was distributed to all Regions, nevertheless its adoption was not compulsory. Further initiatives were also decided and initiated by individual regions, for instance, the publication of official measure fiches on web sites.

The provision of direct feedback to administration by beneficiaries through regional monitoring committees has been a key element of the French communication strategy. The utility of this procedure was acknowledged, leading to the adoption of more open structures in these committees and an attempt to further improve the relevant information flows.

In several cases, RDP implementation in France “suffered” from a too-high level of complexity as perceived by the beneficiaries with respect to application forms, guidelines and procedures. Hence, the availability and quality of technical advice (through, for example, Chambers of Agriculture operating at different territorial levels) was considered as very important to bring clarity about the main elements of supporting schemes and related operations. Through appropriate feedback, in some cases these constraints were addressed through re-formulation of the implementing rules and the revision of the delivery process.

Technical support (e.g. guidance leaflets and circulars) is managed by the national¹ Managing Authority. This was designed to provide both

¹ Mainland France

public (e.g. on axis 3) and private potential beneficiaries with guidance in order to prepare an appropriate investment plan and present their project in a way that it satisfies legal and administrative requirements. Further, the provision of technical support on implementation procedures is also addressing local support structures, including local administration and regional/local bodies of professional organizations. This has obviously a positive outcome in terms of their involvement in the provision of advice to the beneficiaries of the measures.

RDP technical support in France is supplied to both local support structures and measure beneficiaries. It aims to improve administrative competence and guidance on measure application and procedures.



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Conclusions and relevant lessons

The communication approach adopted in France is a comprehensive, flexible system of information and technical support addressing a multiplicity of actors at different territorial levels. It benefits from the existence of a feedback mechanism as a mean to enhance administrative capacity, improve targeting and facilitate policy delivery. Ultimately, it actively promotes the strategic priorities of rural development policy.

The experience put in place also highlights further need for improvements. These include, for example, the need to further strengthen communication channels and methods, in order to reach potential

beneficiaries who operate outside the existing networks. This can also include the use of a different set of off-line tools and a more targeted use of technical assistance.

Partially, these improvements reflect the needs to take into consideration some specificities of the institutional environment in France, and choices made in the programme delivery. For example: the complexity of application procedures in some cases, the semi-decentralized management of the RDP (national and regional set of measures) or the reorganization of the administrative bodies at local level (cuts in number, name changes, transfer of

jurisdiction). These are aspects that affect the delivery process in general and beneficiaries in particular who need –for instance- clear indications about whom they should contact to access to support.

In terms of information supply, the existence of a wide range of possible beneficiaries means that there is a need to identify the most suitable approach for each target group. This requires an analysis on the type of information needed and on how to facilitate the access to that information. ICT-based instruments can be effective but also require certain conditions for their use and should be accompanied by other solutions for allowing access to different target groups. Also, different measures or schemes have different requirements and this must also be taken into account when preparing a communication plan. In this context, the constraints of small farmers to obtain information must be acknowledged and dealt with by their professional organizations or/and advisory services. This is something which the communication strategy and its implementation have achieved well.



The French approach to RDP communication has relevance for future orientations of rural development policy after 2013. As the strategic element of rural development policy comes out reinforced in the proposed regulatory framework the French experience shows a systemic effort to enhance strategic coherence at national level first and – consequently- with the EU policy objectives. In general effective provision of information and technical support to both beneficiaries and intermediaries at the local level contribute to reduce transactional costs and possibly remove some administrative barriers in the delivery of the programme.

In a future scenario –characterized by increasing practical coordination between policy actions, particularly at the local level- this would also translate into making the way in which information and assistance is provided to beneficiaries simpler and more efficient. A possibility is represented by single “entry points” for beneficiaries (“one-stop-shops”) through which beneficiaries can be fully informed of possibilities in terms of sources of funding and options available for different types of projects. In addition, potential beneficiaries are provided with information on a whole range of relevant subjects (e.g. mandatory EU standards) which can contribute to match information needs and turn a simple application into a successful one.

Information included in this fiche is primarily coming from the case studies carried out within the ENRD Thematic Working Group 4 “Delivery of EU rural development policy”. The fiche is compiled by the Contact Point on the basis of the information collected in the EU Member States and Regions and takes into account views expressed at the European, national and regional level. This notwithstanding, the content does not necessarily reflect the official position of the EU institutions and national authorities.