How to...?
Communication

The text is based on the NRN Guidebook published on 2014 on the ENRD website.

Legal framework

Article 54(3) of the Rural Development Regulation (RDR) No 1305/2013 obliges all National Rural Networks (NRNs) to set-up a communication plan as a part of their 2014-2020 Action Plan. The expectations for the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programmes (RDPs) are ambitious and Network Support Units (NSUs) are required to have the capacity to implement (in agreement with their Managing Authority [MA]) a comprehensive communication plan, which (according to the regulation) as a minimum delivers:

- publicity and information concerning the RDP in agreement with the MA(s);
- information and communication activities aimed at the broader public.

Communication plans are expected to particularly contribute to the objective of ‘informing the broader public and potential beneficiaries on rural development policy and funding opportunities’ (as per Article 54(2) of the RDR). Arguably, given that communication is a cross-cutting task, it may contribute to all four objectives set for NRNs by the RDR.

Key elements of a communication plan

The European Commission’s NRN Guidance Fiche suggests that a good communication plan includes links to the wider policy objectives, task description (with clear division of those responsible) and timeline, and clear definition of target groups of different actions. Communication objectives, tools and style should be diversified and adapted to the different target groups (potential beneficiaries or broader public). The Fiche also recommends that NRN communication plans include a specific section focusing on dissemination of both ENRD and NRN activities.

Choose the message to communicate

The use of complex jargon or acronyms should be avoided as much as possible, i.e. one should use of the ‘language’ of the target audience being communicated with. A uniform linguistic style and tone should be used within all communication tools, and these tools
should reinforce and reiterate common core messages and maintain a coherent visual identity. It makes communication more effective if messages are visual, interesting and memorable to ensure the message gets to the target groups. It is important to use creative or innovative approaches to engage more effectively with target groups.

It is equally important to create a common vision about the key communication subjects and messages across all organisations delivering RDP communication (NRNs, MAs, LAGs, etc). This may involve creating new ways and links among key stakeholders to achieve a common understanding about the messages that are important to communicate. The most important factor to develop smooth communication is to share the same values and the same objectives among key stakeholders. This can be achieved by clarifying the key terms used and agreeing the right tools for communication, for instance, ‘moving meetings out of the board rooms’, developing ‘one-stop-shops’ which can contribute greater clarity on some of the key RDP concepts and disseminating good practices that can also help to develop a common vision.

The different ‘faces’ of communication for networking

There is a vertical dimension – often functioning from the top-down with dissemination of information about RDPs and other technical information through the network to targeted stakeholders groups and wider public interest groups. There is also increasing scope for bottom-up communication processes with the opening of consultation procedures and other mechanisms for creating more dialogue with, and direct feedback from grassroots practitioners.

There is a horizontal dimension that links rural stakeholders and actors directly – these communication processes are fundamental to the concept of networking, but involve interactions and information flows which need to be facilitated and organised in a very different way to those communication processes working in the vertical dimension.

There is communication which is one-way involving linear flows of ideas, knowledge and
experience using more classical information actions and advisory / training models. And

there are complex \textit{interactive} flows based upon \textit{cooperation and dialogue} leading to the mutual sharing of knowledge and the incubation and fostering of innovation via the inter-connection of stakeholders and cross-fertilisation of new ideas.

All of this is conducted in an \textit{increasingly complex communications} environment, which not only embraces rapidly evolving new technologies, but also a sophisticated set of narrative and policy messages from a variety of public authorities on key cross-sectoral issues, such as climate change.

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\textbf{Keep in mind that...}
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\textit{...communication messages should be:}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Relevant
  \item Consistent
  \item Clear
  \item Simple
  \item Meaningful
\end{itemize}