



**EXCOVER**

EXPERIENCE, DISCOVER &  
VALORISE HIDDEN TREASURE  
TOWNS AND SITES OF THE  
ADRIATIC AREA

# Communication Evaluation Report

*Analysis & Recommendations*

Evaluation period #1 | May 7, 2019 – December 31, 2020

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# 1

## About the Communication Plan

*What, how, why and when are we communicating?*

Excover S.M.A.R.T. Communication Plan is a tool that serves to standardize project partners communication efforts, coordinate them more effectively and help them achieve the project's goals. It defines staff, time and resources needed and how to use them to reach the project target audiences, communicate with them and increase their knowledge about the project objectives, stimulate the change in their attitudes, and influence the way they think and act regarding the potentials of sharing economy for discovery and valorisation of hidden tourist gems of Adriatic region.

### THE GOALS OF THE COMMUNICATION PLAN

The goal of the Communication plan is to make communication activities essential part of the project, and not have them considered a secondary task, because the successful communication contributes to the general success of the project as much as every other activity within the project lifecycle.

The first step each partner took towards the realization of that goal was appointment of the Local Communication Manager who's main task is to use the Communication Plan as a reference for all project defined communication activities both on the local and on the cross-border level.

### MAIN PROJECT COMMUNICATION OBJECTIVES

Project Communication Plan defined main communication objectives which are helping project partners achieve the change the project aims to bring about in the Programme area. The communication activities are supporting the achievement of the change in at least one of the following characteristics of the target groups:

- **Awareness:** by raising awareness of the tourist potentials of less known destinations, and possibilities for their sustainable development project is laying groundwork for long-term change;
- **Knowledge:** the project is teaching them how to use available resources to increase tourist supply of the targeted area;
- **Attitudes:** the project stimulates target groups to accept the need for better utilisation of existing potentials, providing them with the tools and leading them through the process of planning and crafting better tourist offer;
- **Practice:** by making target groups a part of the project activities project partners are influencing their actions, making them discover and explore the alternative/hidden tourist experiences and destinations.

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE COMMUNICATION PLAN

Based on the S.M.A.R.T. principles the communication plan defined:

- Project communication main goals and objectives
- Target groups and ways to continuously reach and engage them
- Main messages
- Communication tools and methods
- Time frame
- Evaluation measures
- Budget
- Follow up activities
- Success indicators.

The communication plan outlined the communication tools and methods, but is also specific up to a point where the basic structure is defined, and some communication decisions are left for each partner to tailor to the specific needs of their area/audience. Specific situations are dealt with on a case by case basis through the coordination between Project communication manager and Local communication manager(s).

### STRATEGIC PILARS OF THE COMMUNICATION PLAN

Following the project Communication Plan for partners is made flexible and smooth, so that each partner acts autonomously and tailor its communication efforts to the needs of the local context. To help convey project activities, results and influence the behaviour of relevant target groups, Communication Plan identified the outline of the communication process, based on the four strategic questions:

1. WHAT are we trying to achieve?
2. WHO are our target audiences and WHERE can we find/reach them?
3. HOW will we communicate with our target audience and what are the indicators of our success?
4. WHEN do we need to communicate with our target audiences?

## 2 Intermediate Communication Evaluation

*Determining where we are regarding the communication activities*

The intermediate communication evaluation is designed to reach multiple purposes:

1. For the partners in the Project Excover:

- to get overview of the entire communication process with an emphasis on the appropriateness and efficiency of the tools used to meet the communication goals and reach target audiences,
- to evaluate communication activities which were pre-set by the project proposal, and later by the communication plan created by the communication expert,
- to assess impact the communication activities had on the members of defined target groups and possible ways to and sustain it,
- to get a quality assessment of the communication activities conducted within the first part of the project, and if needed change/adjust them to better suite the project needs in the remaining period
- to provide recommendations for improvements of communication efforts and to serve as a referral for other stakeholders and donors.

2. For the Joint Secretary as the implementing authority of the Interreg Italy-Croatia Cross-border Cooperation Programme:

- to have an assessment of the implemented communication activities and their various modalities based on the standard criteria;
- to acquire the sufficient insight to make a well founded assessment of the efficiency of the communication modalities used to reach desired goals within the framework of the implemented activities.

## 3 Evaluation Context

*Which external and internal constraints are influencing the communication activities?*

In Italy, and Croatia it's easy to identify many small towns with very relevant historical, cultural and natural assets, but visited by a little number of tourists, lower than the potentiality of the local natural and cultural resources.

The main goal of this project is to reduce this gap between resources and tourists, contributing to a better territorial and seasonal distribution of tourist flows in Croatia and Italy, still over-concentrated on some sea-side areas along the coasts and a few art cities.

Several reasons can explain this imbalance; sometime they are connected with an improper exploitation of the local assets, even if the number of little communities investing relevant amounts of their budgets on their resources is constantly growing. Unfortunately, the impact of these efforts on the tourist market is usually negligible.

### PROJECT OBJECTIVES

EXCOVER promotes the cultural and natural heritage of 8 less or totally unknown areas of selected Croatian and Italian regions, to achieve a sustainable and more balanced territorial development based on a better territorial and seasonal distribution of tourism flows.

The main goals of EXCOVER will be therefore to identify innovative ways for solving the

A) lack of satisfactory regional/local tourist supply chain, unable to provide a satisfactory tourist experience,  
B) lack of marketability of these destinations. With the goal of tourist development of the small towns with relevant local assets but with poor tourist flows.

Main overall objective of EXCOVER is to contribute to ensure a better spatial and temporal distribution of tourism flows in the Adriatic region, actually too concentrated in summer peak months and in certain crowded destinations along the coasts, whilst other places boasting a good or excellent cultural and/or natural heritage are little or totally unknown, or valorised quite below their potential.

By trying to valorise these places, the project will contribute to deseasonalizing tourism flows as well as to reduce current high pressure on natural resources and carrying capacity of main mass tourism destinations of the Adriatic.

The main expected outcomes of the project are:

- a tangible increase of the tourist flows toward the communities involved in the project;
- a community-led participation process in the tourist development based on a sustainable valorisation of the natural and cultural endogenous resources;
- a wide participation of residents in using their under-utilized skills, goods, rooms, cars, kitchens etc. as tourism resources to set up a local Tourism Supply Chain based on the existing Sharing Economy platforms.

The core aspect of EXCOVER is the involvement of the local communities: only the participation of the residents in the small towns will create a Tourist Supply Chain based on the single under-exploited resources instead of the usual heavy investments in accommodations and transports.

#### PROJECT APPROACH

EXCOVER creates a network of tourist services with a soft strategy based on:

- mobilization of the residents for pushing them to use their underutilized assets (free time, rooms, cars, skills, etc) in order to provide tourist services,
- connection of these services in a Tourist Supply Chain,
- support previous two steps with platforms of sharing economy,
- push on the market these destinations with the support of Destination Management Companies.

#### EXPECTED RESULTS

(1) the first one is external oriented and consist of undertaking a set of coherent actions to promote and valorise in the international and national market little or totally unknown places with tourism potential due to their cultural and/or natural heritage;

(2) the second is internal oriented, and consist of building hospitality-oriented communities through the promotion of the sharing economy as local Tourism Supply Chain, and the identification/promotion of at least 1 DMC-Destination Management Company per area as engine of the marketing and hospitality process.

#### EXTERNAL CONSTRAINTS

The biggest external limiting constraint during the year 2020 was the Covid-19 pandemic. The situation impacted project activities on several levels (inability to travel to meetings, inability to conduct workshops, field activities with target groups, users, limited possibility for all other envisioned activities, change of target group behaviour, zero toristic activities in the region, closed borders (both international and on local level)). We moved most of the communication online, but the real impact was hurt, and the maneuvering options significantly reduced. All of the project activities, communication included were delayed and conducted mostly online.

## 4 Evaluation Methodology

*Systematic approach to evaluation of execution and completion of project communication activities*

Interim evaluation strides to examine the implementation, as well as the efficiency of the communication activities, and uses the results of monitoring - information gathered through the premade communication evaluation template and intervies as a basis to make judgements on the success of the communication activities defined by the communication plan and to adjust it where necessary.

In order to get a proper insight into the implementation process and to be able to draw lessons learned for follow up recommendations different evaluation methodology was designed and used for this interim communication evaluation:

- Interviews with 5 local communication managers covering key communication areas, personal and organizational contributions, result and impact indicators, sustainability and recommendations for further improvements.
- Individual evaluation with the communcation managers covering communication results, main impacts, roles and responsibilities, as well as perspectives for improvment of processes during the remaining of the project considering further project development.
- Analysis of the defined target evaluation indicators
- Press clipping analysis done with the communication managers to assess the project visibility in the local community through the media.

Main criteria used:

1. Relevance (proper identification of problem, flexibility and adaptability of the communication process,)
2. Effectiveness (benefits delivered, objectives achieved, engaged capacities, various stakeholder involvment)
3. Efficiency (qualitative and quantitative outputs)
4. Impact (target indicators achieved)
5. Coherence (in relation to other project activities)
6. Community Added Value

# 5

## Analysis & Findings

### *Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the project communication activities*

Evaluation questions were created based on the communication evaluation criteria also tending to focus on main issues of interest to this evaluation:

- Relevance and efficiency of the communication activities defined by the communication plan used to reach defined target groups
- Possible impact on the awareness, knowledge, attitudes and practice of target groups
- Need for revision of communication tools to further contribute to the overall project (and communication) objectives.

#### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Interviews were conducted with five local communication managers through the Zoom platform. Local communication managers who participated in the interim communication evaluation were:

- Deni Ivanov (University of Zadar)
- Ana Barković (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Karlovac County)
- Lea Linić (City of Rijeka)
- Monica Pascoli (University of Udine)
- Marzia Cavazzini (Delta 2000).

Following are the answers of the interviewed local communication managers collected during the interview, and grouped by the similarity.

**Question 1:** To what extent are communication activities contributing to increasing awareness, knowledge and inspiring actions among the defined target groups?

- Overall project activities were envisioned as a coherent set of actions to work in synergy and achieve the greatest possible impact on the target groups.
- Target groups were very well defined and the proposed tools were effective in reaching those target groups.
- Wide variety of channels used to communicate with target groups is ensuring that the project messages are continually broadcasted to the members of target groups.
- Communication activities conducted on a project level were loose enough to give enough space to each project partner to be creative in reaching their local target groups.

- Defined target indicators for the evaluated project period were mostly reached, or will be reached very soon, so it is possible to raise the bar higher and aim for even greater reach than envisioned by the application form and communication plan.
- Communication activities are in most cases successful in achieving targeted goals.

**Question 2:** Did the partners have adequate capacity to achieve all the objectives defined by the application form and the communication plan, and was the leading partner in charge for the WP2 - Communication able to properly respond when needed during the implementation of communication activities?

- Targets for the communication activities were reasonably set, so each partner had no problems during the implementations of planned communication activities.
- Communication managers demonstrated high level of motivation and enthusiasm in implementing proposed activities, but also high level of professionalism and responsibility in overcoming different challenges.
- Because of delays caused by outside factors (Covid-19 pandemic, replacement of one of the partners), minor part of the activities was a bit behind the schedule, and communication activities were conducted according to those delays.
- Major drawback during the first phase of the project was the Covid-19 pandemic. It caused temporary halt in all of the activities during the first months when the situation in Italy was escalating quickly and nobody knew how it will fold out. Gradually, the project activities resumed, but in limited scope, but the activities that included working with target groups in person (info days, focus groups) were impossible to conduct, so we oriented mostly on online communication channels (Programme website, project partner's websites, social media profiles of the project, individual contribution to the realisation of the envisioned project communication activities)
- The delay caused slowdown of the activities, and finally - the extension of the project completion date. Thanks to the coordinated efforts of all communication managers, and guidance of the WP2 responsible partner who put extra effort to overcome the delay the maximum possible was done.
- Partners agree that they received sufficient support from the WP2 leading partner, and generally well guidance related to production of the communication content.

**Question 3:** To what extent are the communication activities helping project Excover achieve the desired impact?

- Communication managers are putting an effort to make all the project activities visible to target groups through public relations, specially with local (online) media who were familiarized with the project activities and results to more efficiently spread the defined messages.
- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic there wasn't possible to achieve the optimal balance of various communication tools to publicize defined messages to the targeted audience. Lack of the possibility

for “offline” communication left us without the possibility to organize live events (info days, focus groups) so most of the communication activities were conducted online (social media, newsletter, internal zoom conferences...)

- Project logo was consistently used throughout all of the communication tools
- The most visible part of the project will be pilot tours, so greater media exposure is expected for the second part of the project.

## QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Each partner used self monitoring tool to quantify produced communication tools and provide feedback on the overall progress to the project communication manager. Following is the table of the reached outputs, both overall and per partner.

#	Communication tool	Target value	Achieved value	Achievement %
<b>1. Start-Up Activities - SMART Communication planning</b>				
1.1.	General Smart Communication Plan & Strategy	1	1	100 %
1.2.	Local Smart Communication Plan	13	13	100 %
1.3.	Kick-off project meeting	1	1	100 %
1.4.	List of Project Communication Team	1	1	100 %
1.5.	Stakeholders and Media Directory Database (100 contacts per partner)	13	10	77 %
1.6.	Updated Stakeholders and Media Directory Database	13	0	0 %
<b>2. Communication tools and materials</b>				
2.1.	Contents for project mini website	4	4	100 %
2.2.	Project poster	65	65	100 %
2.3.	Project leaflet – trilingual (pdf + printed)	600	600	100 %
2.4.	Newsletter	4	2	50 %
2.5.	Project brochure/publication - trilingual	600	0	0 %
2.6.	Roll-up	26	26	100 %

2.7.	Short videos	2	0	0 %
2.8.	Video interviews	60	11	18 %
<b>3. Communication evaluation and feedback</b>				
3.1.	Communication evaluation template	1	1	100 %
3.2.	Interim Communication evaluation reports	2	1	50 %
3.3.	Final Communication Evaluation report	1	0	0 %
<b>4. Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes</b>				
4.1.	Info Days	13	1	8 %
4.2.	Cross border events (seminars, conferences)	4	2	50 %
4.3.	Final high-level event	1	0	0 %
4.4.	Participatory planning processes	13	2	15 %
4.5.	Participatory planning seminar or focus group	13	2	15 %
<b>5. Social Media, digital activities and media relations campaigns</b>				
5.1.	Opening of social media accounts and creation of Excover pages on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube	1	1	100 %
5.2.	Updates and interactions on social media pages	9	9	100 %
5.3.	Press release	39	12	31 %
5.4.	Press conference	13	6	46 %
5.5.	Articles in relevant EU paper magazines	2	0	0 %

## KEY FINDINGS

As visible in the indicator table the project communication activities are on the different level of completion. Most of the indicators are reached, some of them have been produced even outside of the envisioned scope (i.e. social media content), and some, even if they were planned to be produced haven't been reached. The reasons are multiple, but the main one, as the interviews confirmed - was the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Start-up activities** were almost completed during the observed period. The only activity remained to be complete is the update of the Stakeholders and Meida Directory Database which will be underway during the first month of the 2021. so to ensure that all further activities reach the members of the target groups.

**Production of the communication tools and materials** was one activity that had items which are successfully completed by all partners, but also has materials which are a bit behind the defined schedule. The most intensive activity from this group is social media communication, which, during the pandemic, became the main communication channel of the project and target groups. Continuation of this activity in such scope will lead to reaching multiple higher numbers of reached audience than planned by the project application form and project S.M.A.R.T. Communication plan. Partners had no problems producing project posters, roll-ups and project trilingual leaflets. Project communication manager produced the poster, roll-up and leaflet and provided the partners with raw design files which they adapted to their needs and their language and distributed locally (in the period before the pandemic). Project communication team prepared and issued two newsletters which were distributed to stakeholders and media. Trilingual project brochure is planned to be produced by the end of the project. Partners started recording videos a little bit later than envisioned, but as the time passes, more of them are filming, editing, and publishing their video interviews. The main outlet for the videos is the project YouTube channel, but they are also published on other social media accounts, and linked to project partners web sites. During the interviews local communication managers stressed that because of the nature of the videos (touristic) they decided not to film them during colder fall and winter days, so they waited the spring and warmer weather, so even though the total number of recorded videos during the observed period was lower than expected, according to the new plans, most of the videos will be filmed and published during the spring of the 2021.

**Communication evaluation and feedback** was also activity that fell behind the schedule because of the pandemic. The reason for delay were different predictions as when the pandemic will end, so it had little sense to evaluate the period during which each partner was literally prevented from working due to the epidemic measures imposed by the government. So we waited for the pandemic end, which was announced several times, but the pandemic persisted, and we decided that it is not optimal to wait for the pandemic to end, and it is better to evaluate the current state despite of the circumstances, and to come up with the recommendations on how to proceed with activities the best we can. The first part of the evaluation was done by collecting questionnaires from local communication managers and summarizing them. Second part was done through the individual interviews with five selected communication managers (the plan is to have the second interim evaluation with the inputs from the rest of the local communication managers), and this written report is the result of the collected findings.

The group of the communication tools that was hit by the pandemic the most was the **Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes**. It was nearly impossible to plan for any of the activity because of the constant uncertainty linked to the epidemic measures imposed by the government (possibility of gathering in groups, how much people are allowed to gather in one place), and online tools were unsuitable for such activities. Some partners managed to organize certain activities (Lira managed to organize Info days), but it was more due to good luck and readiness to possibly fail.

**Social media, digital activities and media relations campaigns** during the first part of the project were used to promote the project, project results, project area and planned activities. As the project results were behind the schedule those weren't the topics of these activities. But nonetheless social media was the mostly utilized communication channel of the project communication with its target audiences. Most of the local communication managers were proactive with feeding the project communication manager with reports from the local level, which were then published on the online channels, including social media and project mini website within the programme website. Updates and interactions on social media profiles overshoot the planned number, and by the end of the project will reach much larger interaction level than planned. Most of the partners communicated with the media using the press releases, and some are waiting for more newsworthy news to issue the press release which is a good strategy to increase the media interest (not feeding them with less important information). The same is with the press conferences. Project communication team identified relevant EU paper magazines for publishing the project related articles, which will be published during the following reporting period.



# 6

## Conclusions & Recommendations

### *Pointing the right way forward*

#### 1. Efficiency of the communication tools used to reach defined target groups with defined messages

##### Conclusions

Concerning the overall goal of the project it is clear that the communication tools used were efficient in achieving planned outcomes. Now it is obvious that the evaluation indicators were set conservatively and that the partners operational capacities can be used to produce even greater impact than it was projected at the beginning of the action.

##### Recommendations

It is recommended that, to reach its full communication potential, the communication plan should be revised and new evaluation indicators should be established to reflect efficient communication activities that managed to over-reach the targeted indicators. The WP2 leader will be responsible for establishing of new indicators, and partner communication managers will provide their input concerning newly set targets for the remaining period of the project.

#### 2. Possible long term impact of the communication activities to the local communities and possible ways of achieving sustainability of the new tourist products/routes through the communication and promotion.

##### Conclusions

Communication activities have provided sufficient results and outcomes that could serve as a baseline and indicator for communication activities for the remainder of the project, utilizing what has already been achieved, and spreading the messages even further. New tourist products will be available to target groups after the project ends, so it is of crucial importance to promote them during the project implementation period.

##### Recommendations

For the new tourist products to become sustainable and possibly implemented on a wider scale, communication activities must concentrate equally on promotion and education of target groups. Benefits of new tourist products must be clearly communicated. When reaching the media, project communication approach them with a twist, and create not just an ordinary press conference, but possibly an:

- public event (pseudoevent),
- competition
- award presentation
- celebrity persons, etc...

Creativity in public relations will be crucial in achieving newly set communication targets for the second period of project implementation.

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