



**EXCOVER**

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

# Communication Evaluation Report

*Analysis & Recommendations*

Evaluation period #2 | January 1, 2021 – December 31, 2021

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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 is 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 is contributing to deseasonalizing tourism flows as well as to reducing 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 interviews 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 9 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 communication managers covering communication results, main impacts, roles and responsibilities, as well as perspectives for improvement 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 involvement)
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, but also on the new context of the tourism outlook after the worldwide pandemic hit the sector during the project implementation period, and caused the effects which couldn't be accounted for during the project preparation. So the main issues of interest to this second interim evaluation was:

- 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 in light of the overarching pandemic in the sector which is causing hardship in project implementation (difficulties in implementation of regular project activities which are counting on physical participation of target groups).

#### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Individual interviews were conducted with nine local communication managers through the Zoom platform. Local communication managers who participated in the second interim communication evaluation were: Deni Ivanov (University of Zadar), Ana Barković (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Karlovac County), Lea Linić (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County), onica Pascoli (University of Udine) Marzia Cavazzini, Tristana Randi (Delta 2000), Enzo Mataloni (Natural Park of the Sasso Simone and Simoncello), Marina Rukavina (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Lika-Senj County - LIRA) Anna Somma (Comunità di Montagna della Carnia), Annalisa Stacchini (University of Bologna). Following are the answers of the interviewed local communication managers collected during the interview, and grouped by the context.

**Question 1:** To what extent have communication activities reached the target group and what actions were taken in order to bring Excover area closer to general public?

- Through continued period of Covid-19 pandemic restrictions during 2021, project partners adapted and came up with tools to achieve all communication goals, using online forms and streaming platforms to get to the target group, while informing the public regularly via official social media channels and websites.
- Thanks to online tools, most of the partners had an opportunity to hold seminars, meetings and focus

groups, which were effective in reaching defined target groups.

- Because target groups were well defined in the first phase, communication activities were more focused on certain fields, while the general public got to know the project through transparent publishing of preliminary research results, conclusions and further plans via social media and press releases,
- Beside using digital tools, some activities were held in person, respecting health and social measures for transmission containment, so target groups and general public got tangible (promotional materials, traditional and natural products) and informational (leaflets, video interviews, one-on-one conversation) sense of the project,
- Tourism and cultural professionals shared ideas of creation tourist products in certain areas, while variety of channels ensured that information about the project get to the potential tourists and visitors,
- 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.
- Target indicators were reached to a large extent in evaluated period - regarding reach to target groups and general public, while some of main communication activities (on project and local level) are still waiting for realisation in the final period,
- General conclusion, and something that all communication managers stressed as an important fact concerning the evaluation (not just of communication activities but all other project activities) was the challenge of implementation of touristic project under the covid measures - by definition touristic projects, and especially Excover, was intended to include the local community in all phases of implementation - from planning to testing to evaluating and every step of the way the pandemic was proving to be a really big obstacle in conducting the activities in an envisioned way. That's why even though the activities were implemented, there is still a feel that they would achieve much greater impact if there was no pandemic measures in place during the project implementation period

**Question 2:** What specific methods did project partners used in order to realize communication goals and how did leading partner in charge for the WP2 - Communication encouraged them to help achieve additional promotional of lesser known stories, traditions and localities from certain areas?

- Partners updated stakeholders and media directory, which enabled concretization and detailed determination of target groups for every communication activity.
- Project communication manager provided all needed information and tools for realisation of communication activities, while being available for contact to all partners and leading by example.
- Giving advices and quality evaluation, providing templates and collecting information, proposing types of activities, encouraging frequent internal communication using Zoom platform, WhatsApp group, e-mails, and phone calls - these are just some of the tools and methods that WP2 leading partner established with all of the local communication managers which were very cooperative.
- Because of good internal and external communication each partner had all needed information

during the implementation of planned communication activities.

- WP2 leading partner praised extensive usage of social media, so because communication managers demonstrated high level of motivation, enthusiasm and responsibility, they accepted the idea of promoting localities, stories and traditional products through specialized social media campaign - #Excover hidden gems, which achieved reach to tens of thousands of people.

**Question 3:** To what extent were communication activities taken to the next level in comparison to the first interim report and how was that achieved?

- Due to the Covid-19 pandemic many activities were transferred online, so all the potential of social media was recognized - communication managers frequently sent interesting content for social media and mini-website, they recorded videos and independently engaged in gaining additional reach even before the possibility of displaying concrete project results - when tours had only pilot versions.
- Using the tools such as newsletters, press releases and video-interviews, they ensured the availability of content to the public and laid the foundations for the continuation of project activities in certain areas.
- During observed period, SWOT and reputation analyses were conducted, so local communication managers representing scientific partners made sure that essential findings and conclusion get to the public and local stakeholders via social media, press releases and articles on official websites.
- Following the example of WP2 leading partner, project partners recorded and published more than a half envisioned video interviews, which also served for promotion of the whole project area.
- Despite many restrictions due to pandemic, most of the partners successfully organised informational and dissemination events (info days), as well as transnational meeting which brought them closer.
- Partners agree that they received sufficient support from the WP2 leading partner, and generally well guidance related to production of the communication content.

## 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.</b>	<b>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	13	100 %
1.6.	Updated Stakeholders and Media Directory Database	13	13	100 %
<b>2.</b>	<b>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	3	75 %
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	32	53 %
<b>3</b>	<b>Communication evaluation and feedback</b>			
3.1.	Communication evaluation template	1	1	100 %
3.2.	Interim Communication evaluation reports	2	2	100 %
3.3.	Final Communication Evaluation report	1	0	0 %
<b>4.</b>	<b>Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes</b>			
4.1.	Info Days	13	10	77 %
4.2.	Cross border events (seminars, conferences)	4	3	75 %
4.3.	Final high-level event	1	0	0 %
4.4.	Participatory planning processes	13	10	77 %
4.5.	Participatory planning seminar or focus group	13	13	100 %

5. Social Media, digital activities and media relations campaigns				
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	30	77 %
5.4.	Press conference	13	8	61 %
5.5.	Articles in relevant EU paper magazines	2	0	0 %

## KEY FINDINGS

Project communication activities are mostly completed. Most of the indicators are already reached and some will be reached in the final period. The main reason for that is prolongation due to the pandemic of Covid-19, which got in the way in organising many events and activities, but after mitigation of preventive measures and strategies to control the infection, there will be better opportunities for realisation of all planned activities in the last period.

**Start-up activities** were completed during the observed period. Stakeholders and Media Directory Database was updated with even more contacts than envisioned, so target groups were defined and enriched with individuals and organisations suitable for every communication activity.

**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. Project communication team prepared and issued third newsletter which will be distributed to stakeholders and media in the following period. Trilingual project brochure is planned to be produced at the end of the project, when most of the project goals will be realized - all tourism supply chains and destination management companies will be established, while promotion via multi-lingual website will be up and running. Because pilot tourism packages and video interviews are representing the most concrete content for project promotion, partners started filming, editing and publishing video interviews. As envisioned, the main outlet for the video interviews is the project YouTube channel, but they were also published on partners official websites and social media accounts. Leading partner for WP2 provided an example of a video interview in the beginning of the project, so every recorded video had recognizable theme and motives, which were based on tourist and natural attractions, interesting people and traditions, as well as potential tours which could be interesting to the visitors and the public. Partners

had all freedom when deciding where, what and when to record video interviews - that kind of creative freedom suited all local communication managers, while some of them, during the interviews and evaluation, stated that they will wait final period, when they could show specific stories, people and tours from their areas.

**Communication evaluation and feedback** was the main activity that fell behind the schedule because of the pandemic. The whole year of 2021 was most turbulent, regarding extremely high or very low number of those infected with Covid-19, so partners depended on Italian and Croatian government and their epidemic measures. Some of communication activities were put on hold, held online or with a big caution, so reportings on them were diverse and customized with the help of previously made evaluation template. The first part of the evaluation was again done by collecting questionnaires from local communication managers and summarizing them. Second part was done through the individual interviews with eight selected communication managers (the plan is to have final interim evaluation with the inputs from the rest of the local communication managers), and this written report is the result of the collected findings. In all of that, evaluation was considerate to the new project partner partner, which were given more time, space and help in conducting communication activities.

**Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes** were, despite of Covid-19, brought to right tracks and held in aforementioned periods of mitigated number of those infected - when public events were organized on a higher level and welcomed by the locals and visitors. Although seminars and focus groups were to some extent held online, info days and cross border (transnational) meeting took place at the time and periods when pandemic conditions allowed it. Final high-level event is waiting for a last few months of the project, while remaining participatory planning processes will be held when tourism packages will be defined and implemented.

**Social media, digital activities and media relations campaigns** during the second part of the project were used extensively, again to promote project results, project area, interesting and lesser known facts and stories about the area, as well as other planned activities. Pandemic was once again main problem in scheduling activities, so digital activities and media relation went one step further, with enthusiasm and initiative of WP2 project leader. Social media and mini website got regular audience, with constantly increasing reach to target audience. Most of the local communication managers were again 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 final reporting period.

# 6

## Conclusions & Recommendations

### *Setting the ground for (postcovid) final activities*

#### 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 were again efficient in achieving planned outcomes. After the first interim report, it is confirmed that the evaluation indicators were set according to partners operational capacities, while the main cognition was that even with the least possible engagement, the partners can achieve greater reach of the project activities - on the local, regional and national level. That way firstly projected indicators can be exceeded, while broadening the target group.

##### Recommendations

It is recommended that, to reach its full potential, the communication plan should be filled with project partners recommendations and discoveries, which could become a standing point in implementing communication activities in the final period. Even though the evaluation indicators are known to all the partners, the WP2 project leader could update the targeted indicators according to the level of completion of communication activities. That way making the new and improved goals and their reach in the specific area and communication channel for the finalisation 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 achieved outcomes above expectations for the current phase of the project, so the final period will enable high added value of most of the activities and project partner initiatives. That will mostly refer to new Excover website and new tourist packages in partner areas, which communication and promotion will be based on proven examples of good practices that will ensure that information is spreaded the best ways possible - using the tools and channels which already showed good results. This kind of approach is not only convenient, but necessary to achieve sustainability when the project comes to an end.

## 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 should approach them with a twist, and create not just an ordinary press conference, but possibly an:

- public event (pseudoevent),
- competition
- tour testing
- presentation of the local tourism offer (wineries, distilleries, souvenir shops, etc.)

Creativity in public relations will be crucial in achieving newly set communication targets for the final period of project implementation. The prolonged period of the project implementation should enable local communication managers to compensate for the time lost during the covid pandemic and achieve wider project exposure and results dissemination.

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