FROM SHARED RESOURCES
TO JOINT SOLUTIONS

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

Final Communication Evaluation Report

Analysis & Reviews

Final evaluation period   January 1, 2022 — June 30, 2022

EXCOVER

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VALORISE HIDDEN TREASURE
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ADRIATIC AREA

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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 parnters 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 acitivities 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 achievment 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 possibilites 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/hiddent 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

Folowing 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?

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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 gorups 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 acitivities 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 (inabillity to travel to meetings, inabillity 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.

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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 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 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 evaulation 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 acivities)
6. Community Added Value

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Analysis & Findings

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of the project communication activities

Evaluation questions were created based on the communication evaluation criteria, on the experience and knowledge gained during the project implementation, and also on the new context of the tourism outlook after the worldwide pandemic hit the sector during the project implementation period. So the main issues of interest to the final communication report was:

- Relevance and efficiency of the communication activities defined by the communication plan used to reach defined target groups
- Estimated impact on the awareness, knowledge, attitudes and practice of target groups
- Review of used communication tools which helped achieve overall project (and communication) objectives in light of the overarching pandemic in the sector which caused hardship in project implementation
- Main communication activities in the final period - the last few months of the project implemetation, during which many partners held their live events, tour testings and participatory planning processes.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

Individual interviews were conducted with thirteen local communication managers through the Zoom platform. Local communication managers who participated in the final communication report were: Deni Ivanov (University of Zadar), Ana Barković (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Karlovac County), Lea Linić (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County), Monica 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), Sabrina Tirabassi (Municipality of Campobasso), Roberta Brunazzi (Municipality of Predappio), Valerio Coppola (GAL Montefeltro) and Alessio Flego (Municipality of Rive d'Arcano). Following are the answers of the interviewed local communication managers collected during the interview, and grouped by the context.

Question 1: How were communication activites planned, designed and implemented in the final period, and to what extent was target group included in the project Excover?

- During previous periods, project partners adapted to specific communication conditions, so the final period turned things around again - live activities and events were again possible to conduct, which means that the public was personally involved in communication activities,

- Despite live events (info days, press conferences, PPPs, focus groups, seminars...) the main, or most influential communication tools were once again digital because some partners, due to budget repurposing, got the chance to make paid ads (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube/Google, national media), which had great impact on regional and international level,

- Target group got the better knowledge of project Excover impact, so many stakeholders got included in communication activities - they are tourism experts, crafttsmen, family farms, companies, as well as other local and regional government organisations in every partner area,

- Planning of all communication activities was conducted with the help of WP2 leading partner, which gave instructions and possible variations of every project activity - while having in mind all the opportunities and outcomes,

- As before, digital tools, such as Zoom meetings and live streaming, were used to ensure transparency of important project acitivites - such as transnational meetings, steering comitees and workshops, while at the same time it remained an option to conduct acitivites with stakeholders - such as focus groups and participatory planning processes.

- 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 maximum extent in the final period - regarding reach to target groups and general public, thus way making the project Excover closer to potential tourists,

- All communication managers were pleased that after 2 years of restrictions due to COVID-19 pandemic, final period finally made it possible to conduct and organise remaining communication activities, which were mostly oriented around new tourist packages and the idea/goal to create sustainable tourist offer, which will serve as foundation for further tourism development in Excover area.

Question 2: What was the main focus of the communication activities and how the added value of the main project results was realized by promoting tours, experiences, stories and points of interest in every partner area?

- Communication activities followed project activities within the other work packages, which was mostly held in hybrid format, online and live, on the project and public level. Each partner left a mark on the Communication plan, conducting the project activities (info days, focus groups, transnational meetings, design of the tour packages, final event) and reporting about them in the form of press releases and posts on social media, all with the photo and video evidence.

- Main aim was to promote project activities on the local level (in respective partner micro-regions) using mostly online communication towards online media outlets and project media channels,

- Because of good internal and external communication each partner had all needed information during the implementation of planned communication acitivites.

- Added value of all communication activities that was firstly percieved and finally achieved, came

through detecting, finding and implementing hidden, or rather forgotten tourist gems in every partner area, which used them to expand the offer and create special experience - which was recommended and the tested by local stakeholders and tourism experts.

- The best example of added value came through the WP2 "material evidence" in form of Final Electronic Publication, which was, on the initiative of WP2 leading partner realised as a tourist brochure in order to thoroughly, and in all 3 languages, present new tourist packages. For the Final Electronic Publication, all communication managers delivered content (texts and photos).

Question 3: To what extent was communication taken to the next level in comparisson to the interim reports and how can sustainability be achieved based on conducted promotional and informational activies on local, regional and cross-border level?

- Results of conducted communication activities, online or live, are visible the best in the form of number, or total reach to target groups and public - which counted several hundred thousand people, who passively, but mostly actively got involved in the project,

- WP2 leading partner made sure that every project partner knows what needs to be realised by the end of the project and how can communication activities serve to report, present and highlight main results of every other work package.

- Many communication activities (video interviews, press releases and social media uptadtes) were produced significantly more than firstly envisioned, because stakeholders, as well as local events and initiatives provided interesting content, but also the interested people and DMCs, who agreed that these kind of activities are necessary to induce better territorial and seasonal distribution of tourist flows,

- Partners agree that they received sufficient support from the WP2 leading partner, and generaly well guidance related to production of the communication content, while praising the relationship with the

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 %
1.	**Start-Up Activities – SMART Communication planning**			
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 %
2.	**Communication tools and materials**			
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	4	100 %
2.5.	Project brochure/publication - trilingual	600	600	100 %
2.6.	Roll-up	26	26	100 %
2.7.	Short videos	2	2	100 %
2.8.	Video interviews	60	68	>100 %
3	**Communication evaluation and feedback**			
3.1.	Communication evaluation template	1	1	100 %
3.2.	Interim Communication evaluation reports	2	2	100 %
3.3.	Final Communication Evaluation report	1	1	100 %
4.	**Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes**			
4.1.	Info Days	13	13	100 %
4.2.	Cross border events (seminars, conferences)	4	4	100 %
4.3.	Final high-level event	1	1	100 %
4.4.	Participatory plannig processes	11	11	100 %
4.5.	Participatory planing seminar or focus group	11	11	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	139	>100 %
5.3.	Press release	39	63	>100 %
5.4.	Press conference	13	13	100 %
5.5.	Articles in relevant EU paper magazines	2	2	100 %

KEY FINDINGS

Project communication activities completed. Project Excover came to an end, so most of the project activities were conducted in the last reporting period, because the impact of pandemic decreased and gave the opportunity for public activities – both in Italy and Croatia.

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 acitivity.

Production of the communication tools and materials - project partners allocated human resources for the project Excover according to the approved project proposal. Because the project was prolonged it was necessary to adapt to the new implementation period, and some of the partners shifted positions of their employees, which resulted in replacing the local communication managers in some of them. The updated list of the project communication team is in the annex of this report. Partners continued to collect the information about stakeholders and media, updating the Stakeholders and media directory – the list of decision makers, target group members, key players, newspapers, magazines, radios, TVs, to be contacted and/or involved in participatory processes and for dissemination of project's activities and results. During the implementation of the project large number of those stakeholders was included in some way in the project Excover. evaluation, stated that they will wait final period, when they could show specific stories, people and tours from their areas. Project Excover at the end of implementation has one of the most updated mini website within the Interreg Italy-Croatia website.

Communication evaluation and feedback - project communication team provided feedback based on the pre-made templates, project communication manager conducted the analysis and made the 2nd interim project evaluation report as well as the Final Communication Report. Both reports evaluated the efficiency of the communication tools used to reach defined target groups with defined messages and 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. The interim communication evaluation and the final report are available in the annex of this report.

Dissemination Events and Participatory Planning Processes - during the last reporting period all of the Excover Info days were organized, with an intent to present new tourist packages and tours. LIRA, Every partner, on the example of JURRA and LIRA used similar format: presentation stand with promotional materials, storytelling, multimedia display and distribution of project information to visitors of the event, all with the introduction of new tourist packages in every territorial area, as well as mentioning the results of the scientific partners (UNIBO and UNIUD). Also, after finishing new tourist packages, project partners organized Participatory planning processes (mostly through online forms and polls), as well as PPP seminars and focus groups, which enabled the locals and stakeholders to have their say in how to improve or enrich every tour package.

Social media, digital acitivites and media relations campaigns - this group of communication activities was the most active promotional channel during all reporting periods. On all project channels WP2 leading partner encouraged viewers/followers to get engaged in project activities with interesting posts, interviews, tour packages and information about the project. During the last reporting period, the number of followers and likes doubled, while views and reach in total increased to over 400.000 people – making the online communication activities as the main pillar of Excover promotion and visibility. This is mostly thanks to tourist packages/products which were finalised in the last period at every project destination, which included many locals and stakeholders in its program, while bringing hidden treasure sites to broader audience and potential tourists.

Project partners were sending their press releases to the media representatives according to level of conducting project and communication activities, while constantly updating social media pages and profiles. Lastly, project communication manager provided publication of 2 articles in the relevant EU paper magazine – tipTravel magazine, which is published seasonally (during winter on before summer) and has yearly readership of over 8 million people from USA, Germany, Great Britain, Austria, China, Poland, Czech Republic, Italy, Hungary, France, Holland, Slovakia, Sweden, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Slovenia and Croatia. To promote project results on the higher level, project communication leader collected information and photos from every partner, in order to design Final electronic publication, which was mostly used to present the new tourist packages in every project area, but also to introduce new Excover website and results of the scientific research. In the form of brochure, final electronic project publication has a function of a detailed tourist brochure for selected destinations in Italy and Croatia. The publication was published in the project mini website and on the excover.eu website (in electronic form), and printed in 600 copies, covering all 3 languages - Italian, Croatian and English.

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Conclusions & Recommendations

Capitalization on final activities and future promotion

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 very efficient in achieving planned outcomes. After interim reports, it was already confirmed that the evaluation indicators were set according to partners operational capacities, while the main cognition was that even with the least possible personal engagement, the partners can achieve greater reach of the project activities - on the local, regional and national level. That way firstly projected indicators were exceeded, while broadening the target group and reaching potential tourists in central Europe.

Recommendations

It is recommended that, to reach the full potential, future promotion of research results, findings and new Excover tourist packages, need to be a combination of digital and material/event promotion, that can ensure visibility. WP2 project leader updated the target indicators and laid the foundation for promotion in every partner area. Promotional videos and video interviews had the highest impact, so they can be later used for tourism fairs and similar events for local/regional tourist boards, tour guides and DMCs.

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

Conclusions

Communication acitvites have achieved outcomes above expectations of the project and the final period had high added value of most of the activities and project partner initiatives - thanks to Final Electronic Publication, promotional videos, newsletters, info days and press releases. Also the new Excover website and new tourist packages in partner areas, regarding communication and promotion, are based on proven examples of good practices that ensured that information were spreaded the best ways possible - using the tools and channels which already showed good results. This kind of approach was not only convenient, but necessary to achieve sustainability when the project came 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, while educating locals and presenting them the opportunities to get involved in the tourism sector using the shared economy tools.

Creativity in public relations must be kept at the same level, even after the period of the project implementation, because that will enable tourist packages to grow and develop, not only to be conducted and finished.

Report created by:

Ante Vekić (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Karlovac County/Symbol)

Local communication managers who participated in preparation:

Deni Ivanov (University of Zadar)

Ana Barković (Public Institution Regional Development Agency of Karlovac County)

Lea Linić (Primorje-Gorski Kotar County)

Monica 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)

Alessio Flego (Municipality of Rive d'Arcano)

Sabrina Tirabassi (Municipality of Campobasso)

Roberta Brunazzi (Municipality of Predappio)

Valerio Coppola (GAL Montefeltro)