

European Commission Exchange Hub for DEAR Projects: Planning Communication with External Audiences Aqua Hotel, Brussels 13th and 14th September 2018

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This report ...

... provides an overview of the discussions and outcomes of a workshop with 23 participants from 16 different countries, involved either as project managers or as communication officers of 23 European Commission supported DEAR projects. Four European Commission DEAR Task Managers also took part in the event.

The 2018 Exchange Hub ...

... provided an opportunity for participants to exchange their experiences and approaches, as well as discussing their strategies for communicating DEAR projects. The intention was to draw conclusions from those discussions which are valuable for DEAR projects when planning their communication strategies, to foster more efficient communication actions.

The Hub programme was based on the analysis of the ongoing DEAR projects Communication and Visibility Plans (CVP) and the programme was designed around the key quality features of a CVP, but centred on a more detailed discussion on how to plan communication more strategically and what is the added value of a good Communication and Visibility plan - arriving at a set of recommendations.

The Exchange Hub identified that in designing relevant and successful Communications and Visibility Plans it is important for projects to address the following:

- Be clear about what exactly you want to *achieve* through your communications
- What does your *audience* want and need – and how will your communications address those wants and needs?
- What is your main communications *approach/strategy/method* by which you will engage your audiences/targets/participants?
- What are the main, simple, *messages* (not more than three) you want your audience to know, understand or use?
- Are your *channels* of communications relevant, appropriate and used by your audiences/targets/participants?
- How do you know that your communication *activities* are as effective as they can be?
- Do you 'MEL' your communications - and reach the impact level, not only the outputs?
- How can your communications work help to inform a *wider audience* about DEAR?

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1. The participants and the workshop format

Project managers from Local Authorities and NGO practitioners, as well as two communication officers of the ongoing DEAR projects supported by European Commission participated in this workshop style event.

The Exchange Hub kicked off with an interactive session which enabled participants to get acquainted with each other's' projects, to start finding commonalities to work on during the second day, and introducing the key issues of the workshop by addressing the question 'What is my project's communication main aim?'

From an analysis of the 23 DEAR projects, a list of eight common themes, targets or approaches had been drafted. This was used as a way to form groups of interest to work together in the second day of the Hub:

- Young people
- Migration
- Climate Change
- Awareness Raising campaigns
- Education (schools, capacity building)
- Local & Regional work
- SDGs (localize, mainstream)
- Sustainable production/consumption

2. Communication and Visibility Plans (CVPs) – analysis in general

'Why is it important to develop a good Communication and Visibility Plan (CVP)?' was the question that introduced the second day of the workshop.

CVPs can help by effectiveness of projects by:

- Providing an opportunity to test the project's planning, implementation & evaluation stages
- Assisting in refining the project's efficiency and outreach capacity (staff, time, money)

From an analysis of the CVPs of the ongoing projects common issues were identified with around half of ongoing DEAR Projects' CVPs requiring more work in respect of:

- Sharper communication objectives and results that support the project's overall objectives
- Better understanding of the project's audiences (style, disengagement triggers, their power)
- Improved design of communications approach/method: supporting the project's objectives & results

Addressing such issues would involve, for example:

- The design of the 2 or 3 *key messages* which the project wants each of its chosen audiences to know, understand or use
- Clarity about why a particular *channel* to communicate with a particular audience is used. (A 'scatter-gun' approach is unlikely to work)
- To develop communication *activities* that are relevant to the audience and that convey the messages effectively – meeting the audience's abilities, interests and needs
- *Identifying the risks* of communicating and prepare mitigation responses in advance (alternative methods and channels, emergency communication etc.)
- *Designing a Monitoring and Evaluation plus Learning system* for communication from the start – and embedding the project's M&E systems in the overall project plan, building time for the project team *to learn*

3. Seven questions for the Hub

A set of key questions structured the Hub programme – and a baseline question allowed the group to define clearly 'what do we mean by communication' so that the group could address the first, central question: 'what do we want to achieve through communication'?



To this first inquiry, a distinction of purposes for communication was drawn:

1. Communication about your project: to *inform about* the project, e.g. to raise awareness of, or justify its existence
2. Communication for your project: to *obtain involvement in* or a response to your project
3. Communication in your project: to *enable dialogue* – between you and your audience/amongst the audience

4. Key quality features of communication planning I

Quality features of a Communication and Visibility Plan were summarised into 6 main points to design the strategy – and an example for each well-designed communication feature was presented briefly by one of the ongoing projects. The six main features are:

1. Communication objectives and results

The basic feature that determines the strategy and the other factors of a communication plan i.e. the road map to get to the main aim of the project. A few issues to consider are the:

- Project cycle of communications: Audience > Results > Objectives > Audience > etc. (not the same as the project management cycle - but parallel and sometimes coincidental)
- Decide what you want to achieve in terms of communication (answer the needs; SMART objectives; avoid concepts or jargon)
- Design the results you want: make sure they contribute to achievement of the objectives
- Be clear about 'What makes change happen?' This requires realism and precision of definitions and numbers e.g. what is 'engagement' or 'activism' and how do you measure it?
- Identify your outputs – which is the easy bit. Much harder, but more important, is understanding how these outputs translate into behavioural and policy changes/outcomes

Note: well-defined results can provide you with success indicators

2. Audience analysis

Knowledge of the audiences is one of the most overlooked factors in projects. Some key issues:

- a) Know your audiences/targets/participants:
Who do you want to reach? Where are they?
Why would they be interested in your project? How do they prefer to get information?
- b) Take it a step further:
Use a 'power analysis' to identify who needs to be aware/targeted/involved in order for the project to make a change.
What may prevent your audiences from hearing what you have to say?
Who are your negative stakeholders (opponents/non-engaged)? Why oppose/non-engage?
- c) Link specific objectives to each audience/target

3. Communication approaches

- a) Which communication strategies/methods are possible/feasible?
- b) What is the most appropriate strategy/method for communicating with your audiences?
 - A participatory approach for more engagement of stakeholders?
 - A social media buzz for political pressure?
 - A political dialogue approach?
 - A local, national, pan-European dissemination for a sub-granting programme?
- c) Re-check your approach with the Comms Cycle (audiences - results - objectives)

At this stage, participants entered a group work session that permitted them to get acquainted with each other's communication objectives/results and the (anticipated) challenges in achieving those objectives/results - group discussions focused them on how challenges can be addressed.

A few examples from group work:

a) Challenges to do with Target Groups

Audiences have different needs, different understanding; different response to logos/images.

For instance challenges to do with reaching and involving Citizens:

- ❖ social media algorithms
- ❖ measure behaviour change
- ❖ consumers: a moral issue + self interest

Or challenges to do with reaching or getting responses from Decision-makers:

- ❖ disinterest
- ❖ afraid to take up controversial issues
- ❖ elections

b) Challenges relating to objectives

- ❖ Where should the emphasis be: communicating about the project or focussing on communicating specific project messages?

A suggestion was to re-write the project objectives into communication objectives – making them more specific and appropriate/relevant to the project's audience(s)

c) Communication challenges for projects that use 'sub-granting', where the project's messages are translated and interpreted by third parties

- ❖ Sub-grantees have their own priorities/messages which may take precedence over the priorities of the project. Make sure that in your ToR/MoU/contract with the sub-grantee the required focus on the key message(s) is spelled out

d) Challenges of SDGs' themed projects

- ❖ Build on your audience's interests: investigate, adapt your approach, make the link and start where your audience 'is at'
- ❖ Look at the EU level as an opportunity (e.g. around the time of EU elections, or when EU issues are in the news)
- ❖ Plan (strategize, reserve time to think) and adapt to reality (i.e. your audience's concerns) and change the plan where needed!

5. Key quality features of communication planning II

As soon as a project defines the basic features of a CVP mentioned above, further quality features of a Communication and Visibility Plan include:

4. Key messages (not more than three)

- Keep these short and simple: not conveying an overload of information
- Make sure they are appropriate to the target and the channel
- Make them appealing and not boring or obvious

5. Channels

- Different channels for different objectives/audiences/messages
- Adequate to the target and to the expected results
- Efficient, allowing innovation – complementary
- And: analyse and strategise - channels are always changing

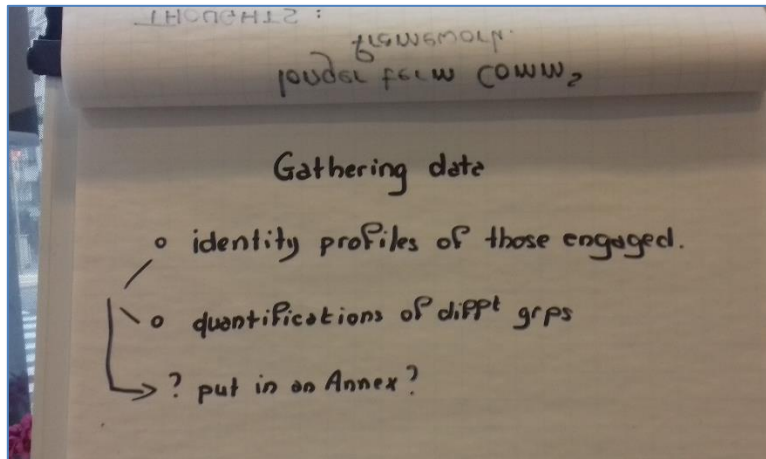
6. Actions

- Adequate to the target and focussed on creating results
- Creative, efficient, allowing innovation, each is complementary

After discussion on these issues group work sessions then requested the attention of the participants to:

- A) Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning from implementation, and
- B) The Risks of Communicating

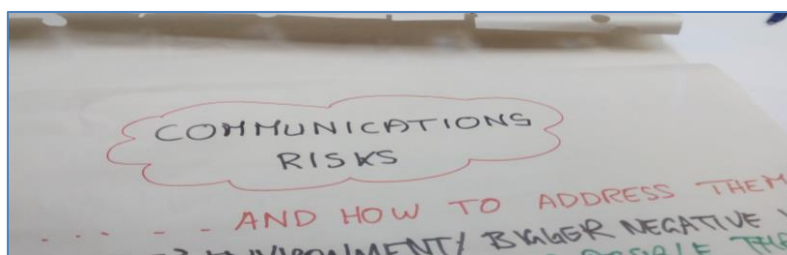
A. Monitoring and Evaluating and Learning



How to monitor the implementation of CVPs and learning from implementation. Participants identified various challenges and made suggestions on how to overcome them:

- Decide on a system for monitoring, for use by all partners
- Have a communication handbook or a video tutorial on communicating about your project;
- Have common tools for partners to measure (how, what)
- Define relevant indicators e.g. for measuring engagement (replacing engagement with more tangible, specific indicators)
- Learn from other projects, from DEAR programme and others e.g. those shown on <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/>
- Keep communication MEL simple
- Prioritize planning and learning meetings and who needs to participate
 - > suggestion from one of the groups: DEAR projects need capacity building on this big challenge of how to measure change in attitudes - very difficult.
 - But also: tutorials on how to keep messaging on complex issue at a simple level

B. On Risks



What are the likely risks of communications implementation? Identification of risks and how to mitigate these?

Participants discussed a variety of situations

a) Communicating in a hostile environment or when addressing big and difficult issues:

- ❖ have a crisis communications plan (who to call, who responds within 24 hours; resources ready and available if needed), Q&A fact sheets and FAQ answer sheets that are shared amongst all partners;
- ❖ pre-emptive messages; plan and monitor the news;
- ❖ Liability risks – clear messages; have professional translations; due diligence and research; have legal assessments of your communication products and messages.

b) To do with 'sub-granting' projects

- ❖ communicating the message though sub grantees risks dilution of the message
- ❖ to have a shared narrative requires capacity building of and agreement with partners and sub-grantee organizations

c) To do with campaigning and awareness raising projects

- the political climate in Europe - antagonism or fear of politicians to discuss e.g. migrant issues > one way to address this challenge is to focus on moral ethical approach in messages (e.g. starting from the values/principles of the EU) + how we depend on each other/interconnected reliance

d) To do with education / capacity building projects

- face-to face contact is essential

e) To do with locally based projects

- beware of different starting points for different partners, countries and audiences
- important to have a common road-tested logo that is meaningful in all contexts
- you need to choose specific target groups in different environments
- relate to external events (e.g. EU elections) that affect the local situation

6. From project communication to the DEAR Programme

Getting back to the basic questions a project needs to address in order to design a sound communication strategy, conclusions can be drawn:

- Be clear about what exactly you want to *achieve* through your communications
- What does your *audience* want and need – and how will your communications address those wants and needs?
- What is your main communications *approach/strategy/method* by which you will engage your audiences/targets/participants?
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- Are your *channels* of communications relevant, appropriate and used by your audiences/targets/participants?
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To illustrate such issues the DEAR Support Team presented the medium-term communication plan which the European Commission intends to use in its own awareness raising and information provision amongst

those who are key policy stakeholders in the EU DEAR Programme, including senior Commission staff, MEPs and EU Member States. In doing this successfully the Commission needs the projects: using their communications messages and outputs to illustrate what the DEAR Programme as a whole is about and what its effect is. Similarly, the Commission via the DEAR Support Team is also planning to provide the projects with messages and outputs that they may be able to use in their work with their specific audiences.



Participant feedback on the Hub

The 2018 Exchange Hub was positively evaluated and considered “very useful, appreciated the methodology” (quote from participant of HUB). Participants were agreeable surprised to “receive the message that the programme needs the projects' input in order to shape its future. DEAR was presented not only as THE Contracting Authority, but also and especially as a living entity that needs to be fed by the projects' contributions.”

The participants suggested to “include follow-ups to the workshop, i.e. agreed to-dos on priority issues” or even “the establishment of a formal network among the projects with mutual acknowledgement of the communication activities performed and a sort of EC-led coordination to create synergies and dialogue between projects” which may “add value to the overall DEAR programme implementation.”

The participation of EC task managers was, as always, “very valuable! Makes subsequent communication - and understanding of different processes - much easier.” Nevertheless, participants felt that feedback from EC Task Managers on queries from projects were “often quite vague” including about questions that had been submitted in advance.

Feedback was received from 15 of the 23 participants who were asked for their open-ended comments and for marks against a series of aspects as follows. Scores were given out of 10 maximum, in which 10 = can't be better and 1 = couldn't be worse

- Extent to which participant expectations were met: 7.9
- Achievement of Hub objectives: 7.4
- Relevance of the Hub to participants' work: 6.9
- Appropriateness of methodologies used during the Hub: 7.9
- Quality of facilitation provided by DEAR Support Team: 8.6
- Logistics support provided by DEAR Support Team: 9.4
- The value of Commission staff participation: 8.9

- Overall success of the Hub: 8.3

Further comments on this Hub and suggestions for future events included:

- Proper dinner on Thursday or guidance on where to have dinner nearby at 8pm: 'People had been travelling and a few biscuits and nibbles did not do the job'.
- In addition to the attention to external communications, it is suggested 'to give attention to project internal communication' [N.B. This issue is addressed in a previous Exchange Hub on 'working in large partnerships'. See Hub report: <https://europa.eu/capacity4dev/dear-programme/document/report-2016-milan-exchange-hub-bpartnerships>]
- Presentations by projects on aspects of their Communication and Visibility Plans [CVP] were too short and became too general. Longer presentations that focussed on the whole set-up of the CVP (as given by the DST about own Communication Plan) might have been more useful.
- It would have been useful if EC Task Managers were able to give concrete examples from past DEAR projects.
- 'It might be a good idea to ask participants before the workshop which themes could be relevant to address.'
- Suggestion on spending more time on making the communication link of the global dimension at the local level and 'how to communicate the messages related to global issues to different types of target groups.'
- Greater attention to the (potential) role of Local Authorities in advancing DEAR would be useful.

Additional communication references

OSOCIO

This project describes itself as 'best of non-profit advertising and marketing for social causes' - you can find here inspiration, as the best videos and tools for NGO campaigns. But you can also find think pieces on effective communication or how to make your video go viral.

www.osocio.org

Radi-Aid

Created by the Norwegian Students' & Academics' International Assistance Fund (SAIH), the goal of such project is 'to challenge the perceptions around issues of poverty and development, to change the way fundraising campaigns communicate, and to break down dominating stereotypes.'

<https://www.radiaid.com/>