

This ENRD workshop brought together representatives of the National Rural Network support units (NSUs) dealing with rural development communication tasks to exchange on and improve digital communication activities.

Representatives from 22 Member States took part in the full-day webinar which allowed participants to learn more and share experience around the following topics: digital methods of exchange and dissemination, efficient online communication, and ways of targeting specific stakeholders. Social media, video, polling and other online communication tools featured prominently during the workshop sessions.

Event Information

Date: 16 June 2020

Location: Webinar

Organisers: ENRD Contact Point

Participants: 69 participants including NSU representatives, communication experts, EU institutions (DG AGRI) and EU networks.

Outcomes: Exchanges and practical tips on how to engage stakeholders better and more effectively using various digital communication techniques and tools.

Web page: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-workshop-digital-communication_en

Workshop Highlights

Giuliana Keller (DG AGRI) welcomed participants and explained how the workshop built on previous ENRD support in [Czechia](#) and [Spain](#) concerning capacity building for NSUs in communication techniques. The increased importance of online communication during the current pandemic was noted. The successes in using digital tools to keep audiences engaged during a crisis, by the ENRD and at national level, were also recognised as offering useful lessons for future rural networking. NSUs were encouraged to embrace digital communication's ability to enable dialogue, involve stakeholders and to target priority groups through different digital toolkits and smart, low-carbon methods.

Exchanging experiences

Irish NSU

The NSU's experience in Ireland was on [adapting communications](#), and James Claffey explained how they converted their public meetings into webinars where around 300 agricultural stakeholders attended weekly. The initial four-week programme of events was extended due to its success and high attendance. This has been supplemented by: video blogs (vlogs) which include EIP-AGRI projects and operational groups; a video series showcasing women's key roles in agriculture; and a children's colouring competition based on rural actions which reached 100 000 people.

Estonia NSU

Meeri Maastik focused on how the NSU had reorganised the informal network governance body (Cooperation Chamber) meetings, where there is no fixed membership. Moving online to a Skype environment engaged some new stakeholders who did not usually attend the physical meetings. The approach even increased the regular attendance as online meetings are often shorter and more topic specific. The platform also enabled a greater feeling of mutual support between stakeholders from a wider audience participating during the pandemic 'lockdown' period.

France NSU

Marc Longhi talked of a webinar series launched by the NRN to create a 'habit of participation' by stakeholders which is now followed by 150 people every two weeks. To ensure the success of the online meetings, the NSU engaged a third-party technician to run the Zoom meetings for them enabling them to concentrate on the meeting content. The format gives a legitimacy to the actions of the NSU thanks to the wide engagement achieved both in stakeholder type and in geographical terms.

Finnish NSU

The Smart Rural Areas roadshow was taken online in Finland as a large webinar coorganised with the Managing Authority (MA). Salla Pättilä from the NSU explained that this was to help share and consult on activities proposed for the CAP Strategic Plan. A large-scale Zoom (and web-streamed) meeting attracted 900 participants, more than double the expectation. This was achieved through regional targeting, emails, messages from the MA and by network stakeholders spreading the message.

Inspiration by professionals

A session titled 'Professional hints and tips for online hosting' was presented by the broadcaster and editor Dimitri Houtart, from the UK's BBC Rural Affairs team. Dimitri acknowledged that different rural audiences exist, and these groups can be reached by different digital communication tools. For example, radio is often a favourite type of media for older generations whereas younger audiences may prefer online meetings and video story-telling tools. Audience size will dictate how to set up and manage online audience participation. Smaller groups can rely on raising hands to ask questions, but bigger groups need more structured procedures such as Q&A via chat facilities or digital 'raised hand' signals. Providing technical support for online tools is advisable as this allows the presenters to concentrate on content quality.

The overall aim for online meetings is to create the same type of interaction between speakers and the audience as that which occurs in a physical event. Chairpersons, moderators and animators for online meetings can use 'TV host' approaches to 'keep the energy in the room'. This can be helped by using planned scripts and pre-rehearsed sequencing of concise key messages. Use subtle hints and body language to indicate to speakers that their time section is closing and keep the storyline's momentum moving. [See the summary of Dimitri's key points on our EURural YouTube channel.](#)



Ian McCafferty



Dimitri Houtart



Brian Maguire

Ian McCafferty from DG AGRI Communications and journalist/producer Brian Maguire passed on a wide range of tips and advice about the practicalities of using digital communication in rural development contexts (summarised in this [presentation](#)). In dialogue between them, many useful key points were mentioned. For Ian, the context within which you communicate is important: how to present your messages against the backdrop of current events and trends. It is also vital to understand your communication goals – for DG AGRI this is to inform online audiences, to create enthusiasm and build trust with the EU institutions, and to engage citizens and stakeholders.

It is essential to adapt messages to your audience, to understand who is interested in your rural network and who is in it. This helps construct the right message. It is also useful to understand trends, to make information accessible, to be able to create video messages for ease of communication, and to use the language and keywords familiar to your audience.

Brian specifically highlighted the benefits of an approach similar to that of preparing a candidate for election, applying that level of production, underlining the values and rationale and employing flexibility in the messaging approach. The target audience's interests and needs should be regularly monitored in order to understand how to communicate consistently with people and adapt approaches accordingly.

Video messages and webinars can be used to transmit the same messages as a press conference. Facebook and LinkedIn advertising tools are useful for reaching a specific target audience with more detailed information, while Twitter is more useful for communicating short stories, messages and reactions. Instagram works well for visual story lines.

The main points from Ian and Brian's useful advice are summarised in short video clips published on the EURural YouTube channel:

- [Social media tips and targeting tools](#);
- [Digital media success factors](#);
- [Digital communications overview and objectives](#); and
- [Effective digital communications](#)

Using digital tools to engage rural Europe in future policy and projects

NSU participant working groups exchanged their experience, ideas and tips for using different digital communication tools. This discussion took place within a virtual campaign scenario which focused on engaging stakeholders in future policy and rural projects. Much of the feedback on any one specific tool often proved to also be relevant for other tools.

Facebook:

- Use Facebook to reach a wide and diverse audience base.
- Craft concise messages and slogans to attract attention.
- Do not put the whole story in the Facebook post - use links to website pages. Make posts visual and always check copyright.
- Use 'role models' or well-known faces to promote the campaign and motivate action using 'success stories'.
- Dedicate staff time to monitor and moderate the Facebook campaign regularly (e.g. daily).
- Invest in using Facebook's advertising toolkit to enhance outreach and targeting possibilities for specific geographical and/or thematic audiences. Evaluate results to inform future approaches.

Podcasts:

- Know the costs and budget available.
- Focus on communicating a few key messages relevant for the audience.
- Tailor approaches for different topics and audiences (e.g. using technical vs non-technical language).
- Carefully schedule the timing of the campaign elements. 'Piggyback' on high profile events or trending current affairs.
- Make use of 'multipliers' and 'influencers' to promote the campaign. Use a story telling format to bring in different views and experiences.
- Advertise the podcasts in advance. Publish at a regular time or day so the audience becomes accustomed to tuning in.

Consultation via Digital Tools:

- Useful survey tools include Google forms, MS Office forms, Survey Monkey and Mentimeter.
- Be aware of 'survey fatigue' among your audience and reduce this risk via concise consultations or by coordinating consolidated consultations.
- Increase the attractiveness of survey work using easy/fun to use polling tools.
- Consider the most effective dissemination channels for participation and feedback on survey findings.
- Websites can be more effective at hosting consultation tools than emails.
- Focus Groups (online and offline) are another useful consultation method and the MIRO software's visual mapping features can offer attractive methods for communicating processes or helping to brainstorm ideas.
- 'Live' online consultations can help to attract more participants and inputs than 'static' surveys.

Key messages

- Digital communication will continue to increase in importance as a rural networking and capacity building tool due to its ability to reach wide audiences in smart and low-carbon ways.
- Targeting tools will help rural networks to demonstrate their value by providing the right information to the right audiences at the right time in the right format.
- Monitor and evaluate digital communication strategies regularly to help safeguard their cost-effectiveness and identify opportunities for continual improvements.

Video:

- Information can be easier to consume and share via video.
- Topics could include promoting local products (particularly food) and attracting inward investment or newcomers.
- 'Home-made' or 'selfie-style' videos are more acceptable now as being of adequate quality.
- In-house production can be efficient and effective.
- Reach target audiences using email lists and online advertising.
- Keep messages concise and simple. Position the main message close to the start of a video story line and reinforce this.
- Avoid building a story line towards peaking with the main message as a conclusion - many video viewers may not watch a film to its end.

Twitter:

- Agree the main messages and keywords in advance.
- Plan hashtags and visual content around these core campaign elements.
- Set and use KPIs based on the campaign's objectives.
- Use targeting tools to reach desired stakeholders and avoid posts being 'lost' in the audiences' Twitter feeds.
- Concentrate on topics that the public can relate to, use simple terms rather than jargon.
- Dedicate staff time to monitor and moderate feedback on Twitter (daily). Twitter is often used as a news source by press and media.