Communication strategy INTERREG IPA Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme 2021-27

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of effective communication has become widely recognized by all the actors managing EU funded programmes. In the 2021-2027 period the Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme will keep the good communication practices from the past and will apply a flexible approach in respond to the new challenges in public relations. The communication activities are designed to facilitate the programme implementation in two aspects: assisting candidates and beneficiaries and raising the awareness of the positive impact of the EU funding. The strategy will outline the global aims and specific objectives of the communication measures, target groups, communication channels, financial overview, information and publicity activities, monitoring and evaluation with output indicators.

In a European context of growing political disbelief, communication is regarded as more and more strategic and thus imbedded in the EU's common provisions regulation (CPR). Even though communication is not a core business task, it is probably the most important support and cross-cutting task to be carried out by the programmes. It is transversal beyond communication units, and so carried out across the Programme by a multitude of internal actors, multipliers, stakeholders and projects.

By taking stock of the previous period, the current strategy is built upon several layers of contributions: the lessons learnt from the previous programme, the new rules of publicity and information, the new branding approach of the European Commission, the joint Interreg approach for programme strategies and the knowledge of the audiences following the programme.

LESSONS LEARNT FROM 2014-2020

The period 2014-2020 made a decisive step forward acknowledging communication as a strategic function of the CBC programmes. The effectiveness of the communication for 2014-2020 demonstrated a high level of coherence between the envisaged activities and the objectives. The achievement of each general and specific objective was ensured by several communication measures. Potential beneficiaries were successfully reached by the info days and partner search forums. Info days were extremely effective, which is evident from the high attendance rates, the positive feedback from participants and the high number of submitted project proposals. Regarding the direct beneficiaries, the most effective communication activities were the **information days** and the **training workshops**. The general public was successfully reached by publications on the official programme website, the **websites** of the Managing authority (MA) and the National authority (NA), and on **social media**. The programme website was especially effective, as it was the most popular source of information concerning the Programme. A very

successful tool was the **presentation of best practices at events such as European Cooperation Day, exhibitions and fairs**. The combination of online communication tools and mainstream media was also very productive in terms of increasing awareness of the Programme.

In contrast, the use of printed promotional materials turned out to be not as effective as expected. On the one hand, the printed information was up-to-date for quite a short time. Beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries and general public predominantly used online information about the Programme. On the other hand, the global marketing trend is emphasizing on environmentally friendly activities and this is following also the rapid change in consumers' preferences. To engage more participants the Communication strategy 2021-2027 will pay attention to local adaptation of messages, to use of more developed online support tools for sharing of knowledge and information and transfer the part of the communication activities like trainings, video clips and official events online. MA, NA and JS will implement on the programme level all necessary measures for transition to green and digital communication and support the beneficiaries to implement these measures on a project level.

PROGRAMME PRIORITIES

The main joint challenge of the CBC region for 2021-2027 is to leave the group of lagging regions and take on more advanced course of development while still facing persistent risk of poverty and income inequalities issues urged by negative demographic change, underdeveloped CBC regional value chains and entrepreneurship, low technological specialization, unattractive and uncompetitive business setting. The programme has the following priorities:

PRIORITY 1 - GREENER BORDER REGION

The programme area enjoys a great biological diversity. However, due to its highly varied geological, topographic and hydrologic conditions, the area is vulnerable to biodiversity harmful practices.

PRIORITY 2 - MORE CONNECTED BORDER REGION

The enhanced EU enlargement process urges both countries to facilitate the increased freight traffic. Under this priority, a new border-crossing checkpoint (BCCP) will be constructed.

PRIORITY 3 - INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF THE CORSS-BORDER REGION

The increase in regional disparities, peripheralization and the urban-rural divide ask for more active role of the local communities in the development policies. Measures in this priority are result of the bottom-up approach.

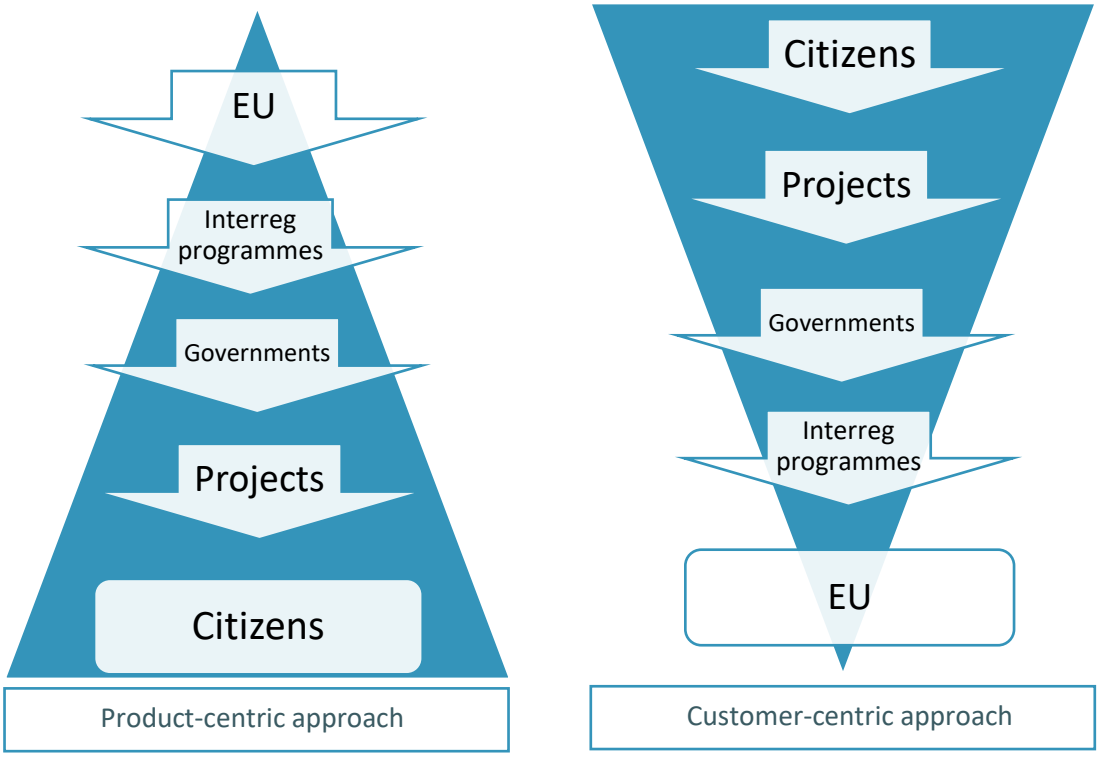
For the kick-off and the ribbon cutting ceremony of the strategic project *(the construction of new border-crossing checkpoint)* the beneficiaries will organise public events with the participation of wide range of stakeholders, including the representatives of the European

Commission. Additional on-the-spot checks of officials and media will be carried out. The construction works – both of the BCCP and the road, will be captured in HQ drone videos and published in social media on regular basis.

STRATEGIC PILLARS

From top-down to bottom-up

Many people consider decision-making in the EU according to the top-down approach – the so called "product-centric" understanding of the Interreg structure: a pyramid, headed by the EU and trickling down to citizens. In order to achieve effective communication and problem-solving, a shift to the customer-centric approach is needed. The Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme 2021-27 has the bottom-up vision, with citizens at the top and the EU at the bottom.



Coherency

In order to reverse the current vague perception of what Interreg programmes do, we need to keep a cohesive communication aimed at creating a common image of all Interreg programmes for all audiences. Our ultimate goal is for everyone to perceive Interreg as close as programmes do.

Change-oriented

The Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme 2021-2027 has a strong focus on a symbiosis of the communication and capitalisation functions to enhance the shared thematic results and ensure a greater impact at mainstream and European policy-level. Capitalisation will provide the necessary oriented contents towards the showcase of best practices and potential policy-change through coordination means, to be promoted throughout the communication channels of the Programme, stakeholders and projects. The capitalisation concept doesn't translate always in actual documented policy-change, but into several stages of achieving it on targeted levels. The communication strategy will support the capitalisation process, in all stages of the process.

This pillar will be channelled mainly through:

- The strategic processes to manage the programme architecture;
- The communication strategies templates for projects;
- The communication campaigns of capitalisation results;
- The synergies created by the working groups.

Greener

The new EU Green Deal, launched by the European Commission in 2019, introduced the principles of circular economy and a low-carbon-based activity, on the Programme thematic-level and on all management activities. Based on that, the communication strategy of the Bulgaria-North Macedonia programme includes these principles in all its activities aiming to set the framework and the indicators for the programme and projects communication strategies, thus creating a greener overall impact of the programme communication activities, for example:

- Introducing carbon offsetting in events, physical or digital;
- applying green procurement principles in all tender procedures to cover communication needs;
- Green procurement to include local production, green certified providers (venues, printing);
- mobilising the projects to follow the example of the Programme in their communication strategies;

More Interactive

Based on lessons learnt, there is the need for a more interactive communication between the programme and its target audiences including the different groups of stakeholders. On that note, we are focused on creating more, better and simplified mechanisms and tools for interaction, on all phases and initiatives of the programme, by setting permanent channels of communication.

Our main aim is to know at all times the perceptions of the target audiences as regards the information offered, the tools provided, the activities launched, in order to promote the necessary reworkings, whenever possible, thus introducing basis for flexibility.

Furthermore, we are engaged in fostering a greater peer-to-peer interaction and synergies among the beneficiaries and project partners themselves and among all stakeholder networks, engaged in the programme.

Interactive communication will be introduced through the following:

- Creating a permanent forum tool for partner search and share of project ideas;
- Creating virtual sessions to clarify questions, during the launch of calls;
- Creating virtual meetings with to foster national information providing on a one-to-one basis;
- Collecting information and satisfaction rates on different phases of the calls for proposals, on programme and national level, to fully understand the perception of the process by the potential beneficiaries;
- Establishing transversal working groups to test concepts, collecting feedback for new planned actions and tools and to get feedback during actions' debriefings;
- Fostering open days to easy the public access to projects locations and activities;
- To boost the use of social media channels for one-to-one Q&A sessions, regarding the promotion of calls.

IMAGE-MAKING

One important part of the communication strategy is how the Programme wants to be perceived especially by its audience public. On this matter, our drivers are:

- **Catalyser for cooperation:** The communication strategy will foster accordingly, through its channels and mechanisms, synergies among the different levels and actors of the programme architecture, ultimately to leave a long-standing legacy of cooperation among partners of different nations in the territories that benefit from the funded-operations.

- **A trusted partner:** a trustful relation between the Programme and the project shall be enhanced, by means of a two-way communication. As the Programme implementation unfolds, it is a critical factor of success to foster a permanent bidirectional communication down the value-chain set between the Programme and its potential and actual beneficiaries and stakeholders, by taking into account inputs and their feedback, as well as providing necessary expertise, experience and assistance to boost the efficiency and effectiveness of a broad programme and project implementation. In this sense, the Programme and Managing

Authority reputation are paramount to provide facilitation among such diversity of public and private actors.

- **Policy-driver:** The ultimate operational goal for the programme implementation is to value the thematic project achievements as inputs for new policies or policy updates on regional development. As a result, it is important to make clear for all involved stakeholders, the Programme's role to foster spill over effects of project results to public mainstream authorities and participating countries.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

The significance of effective communication has become widely recognized by all the actors managing EU funded programmes. In the 2021-2027 period the Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme will keep the good communication practices from the past and will apply a flexible approach in response to the new challenges in public relations. The communication activities are designed to facilitate the programme implementation in two aspects: assisting candidates and beneficiaries and raising the awareness of the positive impact of the EU funding. All these are translated into the following communication objectives:

General objectives:

- To raise awareness about the programme;
- To support high quality projects' communication and capitalisation
- To promote policy change in the Programme area

Specific objectives:

- ✓ *To raise awareness of potential beneficiaries about the Programme and its funding opportunities*
- ✓ *To attract of potential beneficiaries*
- ✓ *To raise citizen awareness about Interreg and Regional Policy in the territories*
- ✓ *To strengthen project partner communication & capitalisation capacities*
- ✓ *To raise awareness about green communication practices and encourage projects*
- ✓ *To support partners in driving quality results for effective policy-change*
- ✓ *To ensure exchange of knowledge and good practices in communication*
- ✓ *To ensure the involvement of multipliers and Programme Authorities in the promotion of Programme's & project's results*

TARGET AUDIENCE

The main focus of the communication activities addresses the potential applicants, the beneficiaries, the stakeholders and the institutions involved in the implementation of the programme.

The mix of communication channels takes due account of the programme's thematic objectives. There are both the digital instruments and E-events.

For PO2 the specific target audience is administration, R&D, academic and scientific institutions and NGOs. Being the "green" priority the main communication message will be focused on the eco-changes that the projects deliver and how they can be multiplied. Youngsters will be actively involved in events.

For PO3 the specific target groups are the local population and administration. Being the project of strategic importance, two flagship events are planned for the beginning and the end of the operation with the participation of wide range of stakeholders, including the European Commission. There will be on-the-spot checks with media and the different stages of construction works will be regularly filmed and uploaded in social media.

For PO5 the specific target groups are the local population, administration, NGOs, R&D, academic, training and social institutions and SMEs. Being the Priority with the highest budget share the communication activities started during the elaboration of the strategy though a wide participatory approach involving all stakeholders. The launch of the implementation of the Integrated Territorial Strategy will be accompanied by an information campaign and match-making events. Special attention will be paid to the new type of beneficiaries such as MSMEs.

Categories	Detail
Beneficiaries: **Potential applicants and Project partners** Potential applicants**:** organisations applying for funding • Project partners: All project partners including the Lead Partner.	• Public authorities: local, regional or national • Government agency • Interest groups including end-user's groups, think tanks NGOs • Higher education and research • education/training centre and school • enterprise, except SME • SME • business support organisation • EGTC (European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation)
Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder Stakeholders with a special interest in the Programme and, through their influence upon networks or end users, may	• JS coordinator and heads of unit • JS project officers • National contact points

contribute to further diffusion of the Programme's communication	• Programme authorities: Managing Authority; Monitoring committee members • National communication coordinators • Interreg Communication networks • Communications officers of projects • DG REGIO including the INFORM Network • Journalists of targeted media outlets • EU Institution representatives: CoR, EP REGI committee, European networks: (INFORM; Interreg)
Decision-makers/policy-makers: The end users concern individuals and/or organisations directly positively affected by the activities and results of operations. Not receiving a financial grant (as opposed to a beneficiary) and even not directly involved in the operation (as opposed to a target group), the end users may exploit project outcomes for their own benefits.	Not beneficiaries: • Local, regional or national public authorities • Government agencies
Technical end-users: The same concept as the previous one, but in this case to be considered: the users from the scientific, research or productive contexts.	Not beneficiaries: • interest groups including end-user's groups, NGOs • higher education and research • education/training centre and school • enterprise, except SME • SME • business support organisation • Local communities of citizens
General public The overall public opinion not directly involved with the Programme, but interested in the results	• College students • Teachers • High school students • European affairs, Environment, Cities and regions NGOs • Professional women and men interested in regional development, business, innovation, environment and European affairs topics • Age range: 6-70

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

The mix of communication channels takes into account the programme's priorities. There are both the digital instruments and events:

Digital

- Website
- Social media (Facebook and YouTube);

- E-events (meetings, workshops, conferences, seminars, trainings);
- PR activities (Newsletters, E-brochures, Visual Identity Manual)
- Online radio&TVs
- Press releases, publications, interviews, photo stories, short videos

Events/trainings

- Meetings, workshops, conferences, seminars, trainings – for beneficiaries, potential beneficiaries and media
- Match-making events
- Local Events for celebration of European Cooperation Day and local holidays

COMMUNICATION APPROACH

- **Press releases** will be prepared and disseminated to local/regional/national media.
- E-Brochure/newsletters will be published and distributed via Social Media and Programme website.
- **Info graphics** will be used for visual presentation of complex information in a quick and clear manner.
- **Press events** will be organised mainly on-the-spot.
- **Photos and videos** from the events and the projects will be used in preparation of publications, promotional materials, videos and slide shows.
- **Videos** – Short event movies will be produced to promote the Programme during the whole Programming period.
- **Promotional materials** - promotional banners/gifts/gadgets will be distributed during public events.
- **Website -** Like a main source of information, the new website will retain the basic main structure as the one from the previous programming period in order to be user friendly in search for information. It will be linked to the single website portal providing access to all programmes of Bulgaria.
- **Social media -** The Programme will use Facebook and YouTube as the main social media channels. In order to reach maximum audience MA will use Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and ads in Google (Google Ads), Facebook and You Tube.
- **eLearning webinars -** A significant part of the online strategy is targeted on online education. MA will ensure the accessibility of the information to the interested parties who can't be present physically at the events. If necessary, all possible below-the-line (BTL) events will be transferred online.
- **Events & meetings -** Human interaction is essential for building trust and allowing cooperation. As a tool to reach beneficiaries and influencers, the events will address the

participants to take action afterwards, by accessing the web tools or interacting with the e-learning section on the website.

- **Trainings** for project beneficiaries (on procurement rules, reporting, financial management, verification of expenditure, irregularities, communication rules and other issues related to implementation of the projects).
- **Plates** with the Programme logo at the building entrance and of the MA, NA, JS, Flying the EU flag)

INTERCONNECTIONS

The linkage and interaction between objectives, audience, activities and communication channels is listed in the following table:

General objective 1 – To raise awareness about the programme			
Specific objective	**Categories of target audience**	**Activities**	**Channels**
1.1 Raise awareness of potential beneficiaries about the Programme and its funding opportunities	• Potential applicants and Project partners • Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder	• Development of programme identity • Programme website preparation • Programme website launching campaign • Programme launching campaign • Single online point of information about calls • Applicant seminars/webinars or Q&A sessions, partner matching sessions and info days • Production of Prog. promotional material • Production of Prog. technical material: online guidance, video tutorials, etc • Promotion of Forum tool • Involvement of experienced project partners in applicant seminars	• Prog. digital and printed channels • Prog. authorities' channels • National info days • MA and NA webpages • Applicant webinars or seminars • Interreg portal
1.2 Attract of potential beneficiaries	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Programme community • Interreg community	• Prog. editable Info. Kit to adapt to local reality • National pages in prog. website with customized information • Social media framework for multipliers	• Prog. web, social media and printed channels • Web forum • Promotion on Interreg Portal • MA and NA webpages
1.3 Raise citizen awareness about Interreg and Regional Policy in the territories	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Beneficiaries • Decision-makers/policy-makers • Technical end-users • General public	• EC Day annual celebration • Open days events to meet projects • Participation in EU campaigns, such as EUinmyRegion, Ding Dong Challenge, etc • Press campaigns through media partnerships and organic content • Increase examples of projects in Inforegio and Interact database	• Programme channels: web, social media • Programme community: web, social media • External Communication channels: national web, social media, press • MA and NA webpages

General objective 2 – To support high quality projects' communication and capitalisation

Specific objective	Categories of target audience	Activities	Channels
2.1 Strengthen project partner communication & capitalisation capacities	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Potential Beneficiaries	• Online guidance and support documents • Capacity building through video tutorials and coaching training sessions&webinars on capitalisation tools • Communication working group • Lead partner seminars/webinars or Q&A sessions, peer-to-peer review events • Production of Prog. technical material: online guidance, video tutorials of how to promote key deliverables, etc • Involvement of experienced project partners in Lead partner seminars	• Programme channels: web, social media • Programme community: web, social media • MA and NA webpages
2.2 Raise awareness about green communication practices and encourage projects	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Beneficiaries	• Online guidance and support documents, including tutorials and webinars • Green kit for projects, available online	• Programme channels: web, social media • Programme: web, social media • MA and NA webpages

General objective 3 – To promote policy change in the Programme area

Specific objective	Categories of target audience	Activities	Channels
3.1 Support partners in driving quality results for effective policy-change	• Interreg community • Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder	• Coaching seminars on policy and capitalisation promotion • Communication group meetings • Closely monitor Projects com strategies	• Programme channels: web, helpdesk • Helpdesk services
3.2 To ensure exchange of knowledge and good practices in communication	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Programme community • Interreg community	• Mapping and identifying capitalisation success stories • Participation of capitalisation partners on Prog. Newsletter • Engage governance projects in EU and Programme campaigns • Podcasts campaign on capitalisation success stories	• Programme channels: web, social media • MA and NA webpages
3.3 Ensure the involvement of multipliers and Programme Authorities in the promotion of Programme's & project's results	• Multiplier and/or strategic stakeholder • Beneficiaries • Decision-makers/policy-makers • Technical end-users	• Media seminars about thematic of the Programme • Press kit on Programme policy-making contributions • Promotion of Programme; participation in EU events and campaigns • Contribution to national events in our member States	• Programme channels: web, social media • MA and NA webpages

BRAND NAMING

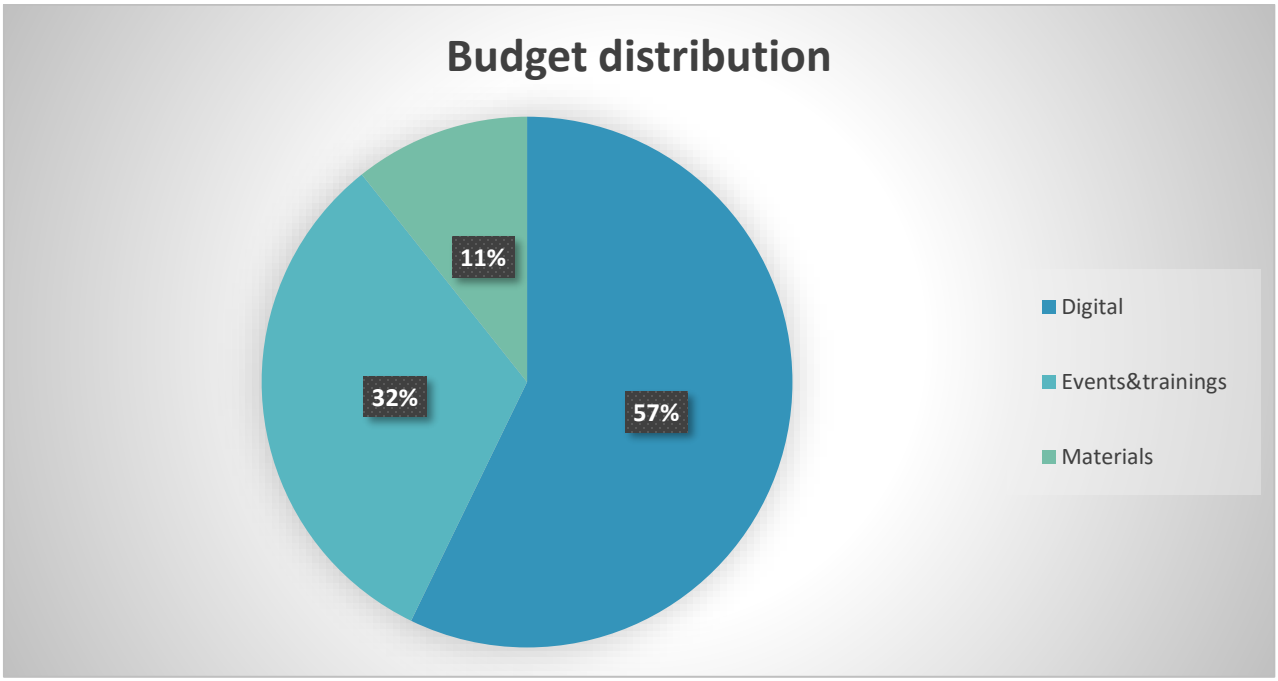
The programme brand naming has a short and a full version. The versions have different usages, as follows:

Versions	Naming	Use
Short version	Interreg Bulgaria-North Macedonia Programme	Logo, social media tags, internal documents
Full text version	Interreg IPA Bulgaria-North Macedonia 2021-27 Programme	Official documents

BUDGET

The total budget for communication activates equals 0.3% of the total programme budget – 93 457 euro. The costs break down below presents an indicative financial plan by activity / channel and year.

	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028	2029	Total
Digital media *website, social media, SEO, Google ads, video production, banners, online radio&TVs*	3457	10000	5000	6000	6000	7000	8000	8000	**53457**
Events and trainings	2000	4000	5000	5000	4000	4000	3000	3000	**30000**
Promotional materials	0	10000	0	0	0	0	0	0	**10000**
Total	**5457**	**24000**	**10000**	**11000**	**10000**	**11000**	**11000**	**11000**	**93457**



MONITORING AND EVALUATION

The communication officer will be responsible for monitoring and coordination of communication and visibility measures. MA will report to the JMC once a year the progress and the analysis in the implementation of the communication and visibility actions. All actions will be regularly evaluated internally and results will be presented for approval and guidance to the JMC. Sources of the evaluation of the communication objectives will come from surveys, internal statistics, project reports and website analytics. Evaluation of the communication strategy will be also part of the overall programme's evaluation measures.

Type of activities	Output indicator	Target 2029	Result indicator	Target 2029
Events	No. of events for potential applicants / beneficiaries / stakeholders / general public	25	Overall usefulness of the event for attendees (survey)	75% CSAT score

	No. of participants in the events	1300		
Publications	No. of publications (including Social media)	350	Overall usefulness of the publications for readers (survey)	75% CSAT score
Programme website	No. of visits	70000	Overall usefulness of the site/page for readers (survey)	75% CSAT score
Social media	No. of followers/ subscribers	700	No. of shares, likes, views, comments and hashtag mentions	1000