

WHEN COMMUNICATION FACILITATES THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A PROGRAM AND ITS APPROPRIATION BY THE TARGET AUDIENCES: THE CASE OF ECOAGRIS

INTRODUCTION

Given the shortcomings of the existing information facilities and with the introduction of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) Agricultural Policy and the CAADP, ECOWAS, in collaboration with partner institutions, decided to set up an integrated Agricultural Information System « ECOAGRIS ».

ECOAGRIS was meant to be a « dynamic instrument for monitoring agriculture in West Africa and should thus help provide updated information for the development, monitoring and evaluation of all the work and initiatives undertaken in the implementation of ECOWAP / CAADP».

The purpose of ECOAGRIS is to make available to decision-makers reliable data, information and well informed analysis for:

- (i) the formulation and monitoring of policies and strategies for agricultural development,
- (ii) the management of food security issues in West Africa as well as
- (iii) the promotion of trade in food products.

The design process of the "Regional Agricultural Information System" (ECOAGRIS) which started in 2007 has several stages, including:

- the definition and validation of the concept note of its implementation at regional and national level (Ouagadougou, May 2007)
- the adoption of guidelines (Cotonou, April 2008)
- the adoption of objectives and results of ECOAGRIS (Dakar, June 2009)
- the validation of a guidance note (Abuja, August 2009) and finally
- the Cotonou meeting on the formulation of final terms of reference for the implementation of the ECOAGRIS system (3 to 8 October 2010).

In response to the food crisis of December 2008, the EU initiated the "Food Facility" programme (EUFF) for a period of three years from 2009 to 2011. As part of this initiative, a regional 'EU- IFAD and ECOWAS Food Facility Programme' is being implemented in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal by ECOWAS, IFAD and ICRISAT.

The overall objective of the program is to strengthen regional integration through support to improve access to food and food security in the West African region.

The EU - IFAD and ECOWAS Food Facility Program focuses on three components:

- Component A designed to increase agricultural productivity thanks to the availability and access to improved rice, maize and groundnuts seeds as well as cassava cuttings and other tubers. This component will be implemented by IFAD through its projects in the countries concerned
- Component B implemented by ICRISAT focuses on enhancing sorghum and millet production throughout the region, through the dissemination of innovations adapted to low rainfall and soil fertility.
- Component C, managed by ECOWAS, is intended to assist this institution to acquire capacity to support and manage the regional interventions for the mobilization of the ECOWAP mechanism. Particular attention is paid to information systems for monitoring the implementation of ECOWAP.

As part of the implementation of component C of the program, ECOWAS selected UNOPS as the program's implementing agency to operationalize the ECOAGRIS system and establish a Food Security component for the information system. An agreement was signed between these two institutions in September 2011 to carry out the following five major activities previously identified:

- the implementation of the ECOAGRIS system and the development of the food security component in member countries of the program ;
- installation of local networks and their interconnection at country level, and later at regional level;
- the acquisition of computer equipment and software;
- the implementation of the communication and visibility plan;
- the implementation of a capacity building program.

The activity covered by this capitalization concerns the implementation of the communication and visibility plan from October 2011 to April 2012 and involves seven (7) ECOWAS member States, beneficiaries of the Regional Food Facility Program.

I. DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVE

a. Objectives of the visibility and communication mission

The overall objective of the visibility and communication mission, contained in the communication plan proposed by the European Union and the ECOWAS Commission, was to maximize the visibility of the ECOWAS Agricultural Information System.

More specifically, it entails carrying out a set of communication activities addressed to Government-run technical services producing agricultural information, policy makers and non-State actors involved in the agricultural sector and the media in order to:

- ensure ECOAGRIS' visibility among the key actors covered by this program ;
- develop a positive image content and sympathy towards ECOAGRIS ;
- increase the target audience's commitment, involvement and appropriation of ECOAGRIS.

To that end, UNOPS set up, within the project implementation team, a communication team composed of two experts:

- A communication expert mandated to conduct the communication and 'visibilization' process;
- A designer and graphic artist in charge of designing, creating and overseeing the entire equipment used as a medium of communication, sensitization and promotion of the ECOWAS component of the Regional Food Facility Program.

This team worked with all stakeholders to carry out the communication and 'visibilization' activities:

- The project team which provided ideas, advice and recommendations that contributed to the definition of the creative axes and the creation of communication media;
- The ECOWAS Commission's Directorate of Agriculture and Rural Development contributed, on the one hand, in the formulation of creative concepts, messages and in the development of the hardware communication equipment and the validation of mockups, messages, visuals proposed for communication on the other;

- the Communication Directorate of the ECOWAS Commission which ensured compliance with the ECOWAS graphic chart and editorial line ;
- The media that relayed the information on ECOAGRIS over television channels, the print press, radios and the Internet.

b. Strategic and methodological approach

After a feasibility analysis of the communication plan developed by the European Union and the ECOWAS Commission, the communication expert proposed the reorganization of actions and of the budget of the said plan. The new communication plan was supported by an increased budget, a more targeted alignment of activities and an implementation schedule. An arbitration session for the reassignment of the program's overall budget resources was held with the entire UNOPS project team during which consensus was reached on the shifting of available resources. Thus, the budget for the visibility and communication activity was increased by 250%, to 52000 dollars, representing 2% of the overall budget of the program.

The communication team primarily focused on the identification of axes of communication and creation. To that end, it organized a brainstorming session with the project team using projective techniques and role-playing. The results of this exercise and the use of project documents helped identify the axes of communication and creation.

Thus, the ECOAGRIS logo, messages and creative models of all the means of communication were developed, and validated by the Directorate of Communication and the Directorate of Agriculture and Rural Development of ECOWAS.

c. Communication activities

The communication plan comprised various activities:

- ✓ Creating the program's graphic identity;
- ✓ Creating and producing the program's publishing, visibility and promotion material;
- ✓ Media campaigns (print and oral press) and media coverage of the program's flagship activities ;
- ✓ Lobbying and public relations activities towards the target public (information and sensitization in the seven Member States of the regional community with the official launching of ECOAGRIS and the

handover of the IT equipment and software to back-up the architecture of the system, web-mailing)

Resources used to finance these various activities are estimated at 40 000 US dollars.

II. EXPERIENCE ANALYSIS

The visibility and communication activity led to the production of a multiplicity of materials for information and promotional purposes. These include brochures, leaflets, newsletters, stickers, kakemonos, mouse pads, etc.

Most of this material was distributed to the target populations during the information and sensitization tour in member States, promoting the recipients' strong attachment to the program. ECOAGRIS is well referenced in the Internet. It henceforth has a good visibility in the classical results of search engines such as Google, Yahoo etc.

Also, many articles in the national press of the program's member countries and some international press magazines were published (Flyers advertising ECOAGRIS were inserted in 'Jeune Afrique Magazine' and 'Marchés Tropicaux'). Radio and television interviews, broadcast on local channels during prime time, helped build the project's name. An average of fifteen articles in the national print press of member States visited during the information and sensitization tours were published. Moreover, the seven television channels and public radio stations of these countries broadcast reports and interviews on the program during prime time.

Below are some examples of publications in West African daily newspapers:



In short, media spin-offs were significant and helped to better publicize the program. In this regard, the media fully played their information-relaying role.

Target actors are well informed about the program. They had a better understanding of issues as well as benefits they could gain from the program. Actors of structures in charge of producing agricultural information lengthily discussed the program in technical workshops organized during the tours, confirming the keen interest aroused by the program when information is provided to them. In addition, actors fully participated in the training workshops organized after the information and sensitization tours.

The field activities of the information and sensitization tours in member States made the program less conceptual. They also helped collect views, perceptions and expectations about the program, which will enrich the reflection and better steer the messages in future. For example, the experts of structures in charge of producing agricultural information reveal that the program is perceived more as an ECOWAS project than as a program belonging to member States. As a result, communication actions will seek to strengthen the internalization of the program by its beneficiaries.

Messages of congratulations were addressed to the communication expert expressing the satisfaction of officials of the Agriculture and Rural Development Directorate with regard to the program's implementation component. The officials received positive feedback from the field or through journal articles (sent by a freelancer) on the visits of the project team in member States during the information and sensitization tours.

Several factors contribute to explaining these various successes. Flexibility in resource allocation and in providing additional resources contributed to the implementation of the activities of the communication plan. They are also a source of motivation for the program's communication unit.

The provision of financial resources and the existence of rigorous and transparent UNOPS procurement procedures enhanced the recruitment of an experienced and competent creative/graphist consultant and the selection of skilled sub-contractors (printers, screen printers).

The mobilization and team spirit of the project team around the visibility and communication initiative was decisive in the management of stress caused by the very short deadlines set for the implementation of communication activities and served as a motivating factor for those in charge of carrying them out.

Even though the experience was globally conducted in a favourable atmosphere, the project team was sometimes confronted with lack of reactivity by the ECOWAS Directorate of

Agriculture and Rural Development, primarily with regard to the validation of creative projects submitted to them for approval. This sometimes led to delays in the production of communication materials. Their increased availability would have been appreciated.

CONCLUSION

The key lessons learnt from this experience can be summarized as follows:

First, the inclusion of the communication component in all development projects, particularly long-term projects such as ECOAGRIS, facilitates the efficient implementation of operations since it eases its appropriation by the various stakeholders and at all levels of intervention.

Secondly, and in the specific case of the Regional Food Facilitation Program, the development of a global communication strategy taking into account the three components of the program would have provided an added value. Actually, it would have led to greater consistency and a synergy of actions, avoid duplicating efforts, in addition to economies of scale.

Finally, with regard to the prospective aspects for ECOAGRIS, we recommend adopting a more interactive approach with our target public by collecting their views, perceptions, expectations on the program and its implementation either through semi-structured interviews or through focus groups. This should help us enrich our discourse, and make it even more credible as well as identify new avenues for the use of communication tools and facilities that are better adapted to their realities.