

Making language simple to enhance the effectiveness of communication actions of Operational Programs

Introduction: Cohesion Policy, EIS Funds, and Operational Programs.

Cohesion policy is the main investment policy of the European Union. It supports economic growth, job creation, business competitiveness, sustainable development and environmental protection, offering benefits to all regions and cities of the EU.

It was first recognized in the Single European Act of 1986, which identified its purpose as “to reduce the gap between the various regions and the backwardness of the least-favoured regions.” The Lisbon Treaty (which came into force on December 1, 2009) introduced a third dimension of cohesion in the EU: the territorial dimension, so we began to speak of “economic, social and territorial cohesion.”

For the 2014 - 2020 programming period, “cohesion policy” absorbed 34% of the Union’s budget (325 billion euros), representing the policy framework underlying hundreds of thousands of projects across Europe that receive funding through the so-called European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF), which are:

- the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
- the European Social Fund (ESF) (ESF+ new program)
- the Cohesion Fund (CF)
- the European agricultural fund for rural development (EAFRD)
- the European Maritime, Fisheries, and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF)

For the 2021- 2027 programming phase, the cohesion policy package amounts to more than EUR 330 billion (in 2018 prices), or nearly one-third of the EU’s long-term budget, plus EUR 750 billion made available by the Next Generation EU recovery instrument.

The ways in which ESIF contributions are spent are defined through detailed plans, drawn up at the national or regional level, which are called “Operational Programs.”

Communication in the Operational Programs

The obligation to communicate and disseminate results is included in all EU-funded Programs, including Operational Programs.

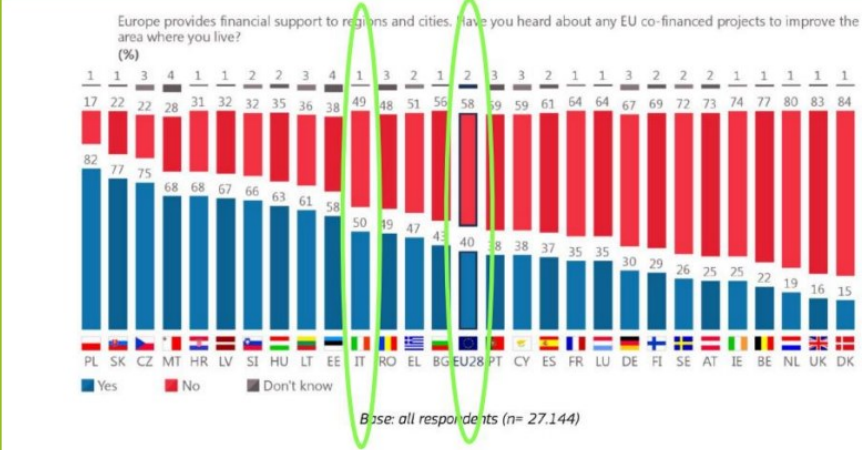
Each year, Cohesion Policy Funds support thousands of projects across Europe and are the most tangible manifestation of the EU on the ground. More effective communication of these interventions helps to increase awareness of the benefits the EU provides to people’s lives and improve the public image of the Union.

Eurobarometer surveys, commissioned by the European Parliament in all EU member states since 2007, show that, especially in Italy, a good level of awareness of the interventions that the EU deploys is unfortunately matched by a poor perception of the benefits they produce:

:

L'Europa fornisce sostegno finanziario alle regioni e alle città. Hai mai sentito parlare di un progetto cofinanziato dall'UE per migliorare la zona in cui vivi?

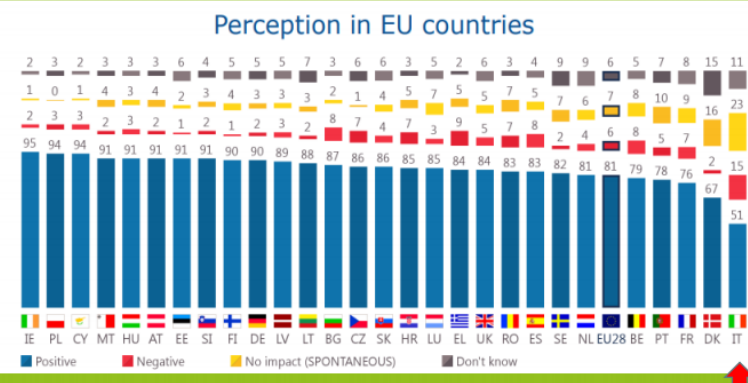
Gli italiani hanno una discreta conoscenza circa i progetti cofinanziati dall'UE...MA...



Flash Eurobarometro «Conoscenza dei cittadini della politica regionale europea» (ottobre 2019)

Q.1.C Considerando i progetti cofinanziati dall'UE, direbbe che essi hanno avuto un impatto positivo o negativo sullo sviluppo della sua città?

...MA...siamo i più NEGATIVI rispetto all'impatto dei progetti finanziati dall'UE



Flash Eurobarometro «Conoscenza dei cittadini della politica regionale europea» (ottobre 2019)

In the face of the worrying data above, the EU institutions are taking an increasing interest in the proper communication of structural funds. The regulatory framework has gradually evolved over the different programming periods from simple publicity requirements (2007 - 2013) to more detailed communication and transparency obligations that, in the current programming period (2014 - 2020), has come to recognize the strategic function played by program communication.

For the 2021 - 2027 programming phase, the legal basis enshrining the information and communication obligation is Articles 46-50 and in Annex IX of Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 of the European Parliament and of the Council of June 24, 2021, as well as the Publication "Communicating Cohesion Policy in the period 2021- 2027, European Commission, December 2020." Communication in the next programming period has an even more challenging goal: no longer mere fulfilment of the Regulatory dictate but a tool through which to reduce the distance between citizens and Europe and to explain, in simple and immediate language, how European policies become part of everyone's daily life.

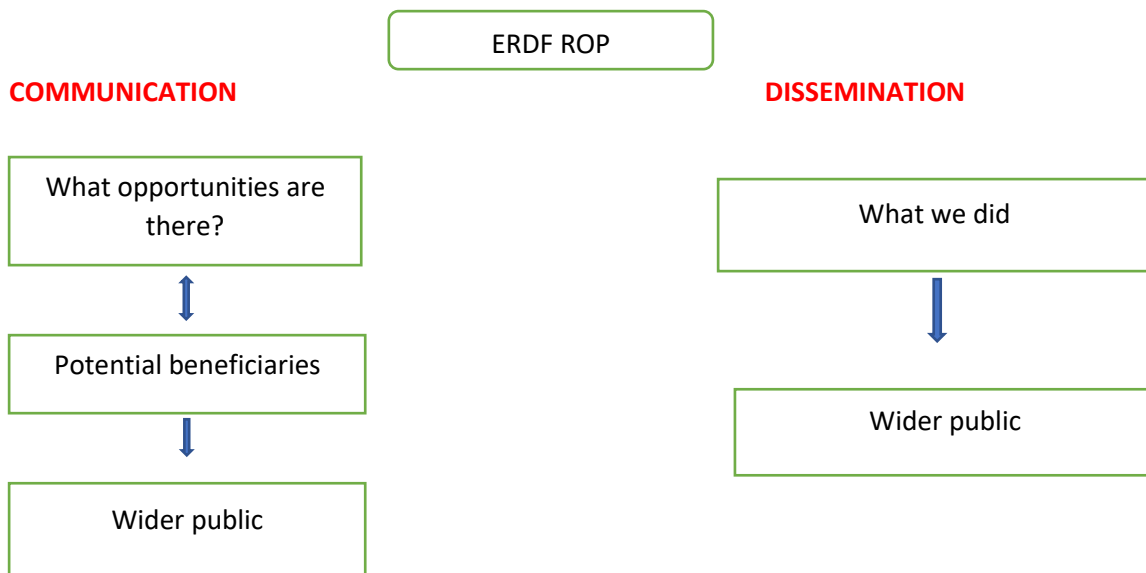
Project Work

The Project Work that I intend to develop has to do with the communication of the Regional Operational Program of the European Regional Development Fund (ROP ERDF) 2014 -2020 of the Region of Umbria, and in particular I intend to arrive at the realization of a product that can facilitate potential beneficiaries in participating in a call for proposals intended for cultural and creative enterprises. The topic is particularly congenial to me since I am a civil servant of the Umbria Region, responsible for communication of the ERDF ROP.

Before proceeding with the work, it is necessary to distinguish between “communication” and “dissemination,” expressions that indicate quite distinct actions:

- “communication” means the dissemination of the existence and content of the project;
- by “dissemination” we mean the transfer of the results obtained to facilitate their use by other parties.

In the context of the Communication Strategy of the ERDF ROP, this is translated into the following scheme:



In both cases, the goal is to shorten the distance between citizens and Europe: on the one hand, to make the funding lines that are allocated under the individual Programs understandable (and therefore accessible) to everyone; on the other hand, to explain, in simple and immediate language, the degree to which European policies become part of everyone’s daily life.

In the present paper we deal only with communication, that is, how to let the widest possible public know what opportunities there are with the ERDF ROP.

On this topic we need to open a brief parenthesis that allows us to distinguish between “information” and “communication.”

COMMUNICATION VS INFORMATION

INFORM	A (active) → B (passive)	Orient the recipient in the reality around him without information influencing his activity
COMMUNICATE	A ↔ B (all participants are active)	Communication not only conveys information, but also provides guidance on how to treat the given information, how to interpret it

Therefore, the ultimate goal of this work is to create a new communication pathway that will increase the number and quality of subjects who have access to European calls for proposals.

This will only be possible through a process that allows us to move from “information” to “communication” with the broadening of the target audience and the increase in the number of subjects reached by the communication who can become users of the calls (intermediate objective).

The expected result for the PA will thus be to shorten the distance with citizens, demonstrating that institutions (starting from the European ones, to the local ones, passing through State and Region) are at their side especially in a difficult time of recovery such as the one we are experiencing.

Basically, it will be a matter of making information (i.e., the news that the Regional Authority makes public “as is”) a communication (“to be”), in the sense of “communicating” that we have defined above

The output of the work will be the creation of a communication product that affects the simplification of language in communicating the opportunities offered by the Operational Program to potential beneficiaries, to answer the question “what are the possibilities?” This example can be replicated and adapted to different needs of both the ERDF ROP and other Community Programs.

The objectives of a project must be “SMART”: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound, i.e., with a definitive timeline.

The European communication model is characterized by 5 specific assets:

1. *Input* - definition of what needs to be effectively planned and outlined as a successful communication action: it is essential to define it correctly in order to then be able to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the activities put in place;
2. *Activity* - definition of what needs to be done to arrive at the “final product” of communication. Monitoring of the activity is essential in order to be able to correct the project in progress.
3. *Output* - what is accomplished to reach and engage a target audience. In this case it will be necessary to set output and outcome indicators
4. *Results* - the immediate effect achieved by the communication: assessable with outcome indicators e.g., survey during the seminar
5. *Impact* - represents the change produced in public opinion, society, the economy or even just in individual behaviour as a result of the communication actions carried out.

In this case the evaluation is more complex because for the area of institutional communication we normally rely on demographic surveys.

The entire project path is accompanied by monitoring and evaluation activities, carried out with a view to enhancing accountability, through a system that makes it possible to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the project and, if necessary, modify it as it progresses.

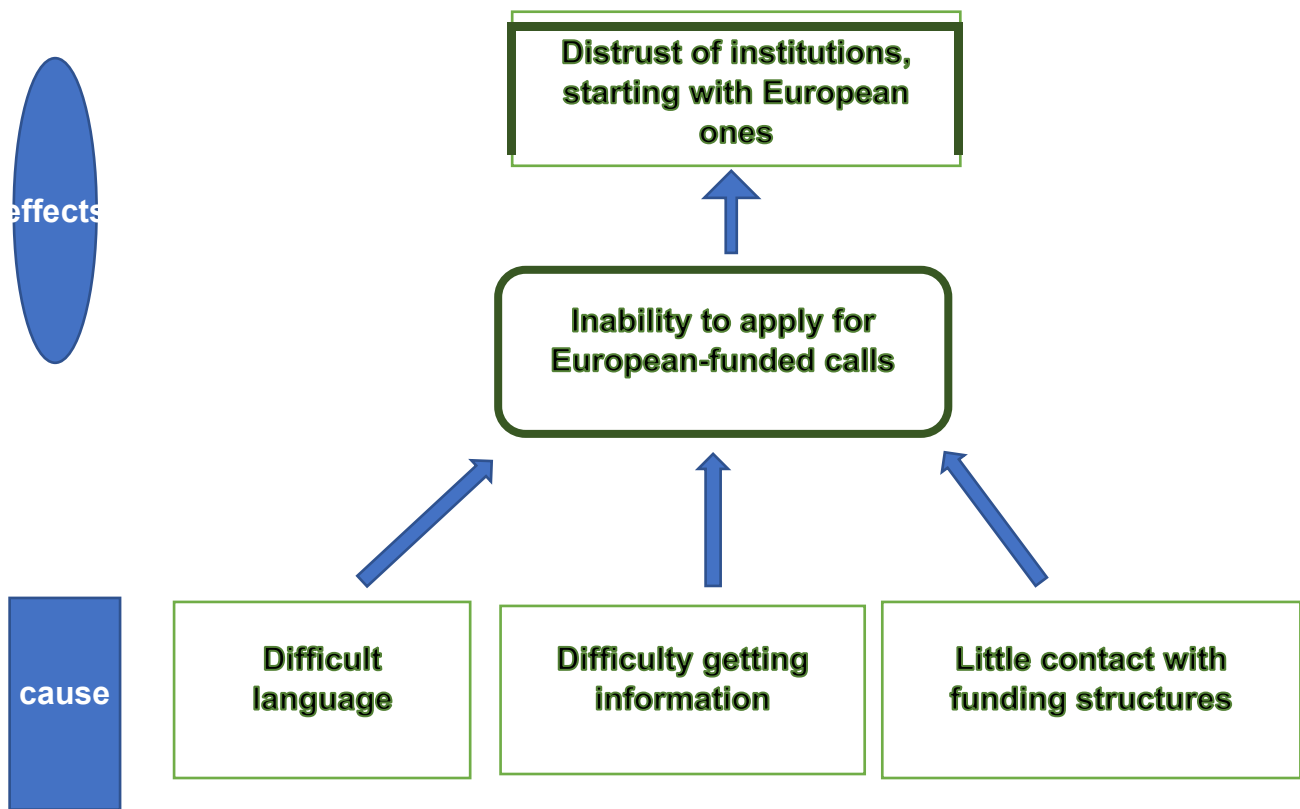
From the development of an effective methodology for facilitating access to EU funding should flow positive spillovers in public opinion for Administrations managing European Funds.

Following the **PCM** method, I started from problem analysis, using exogenous and endogenous data (**analysis phase**):

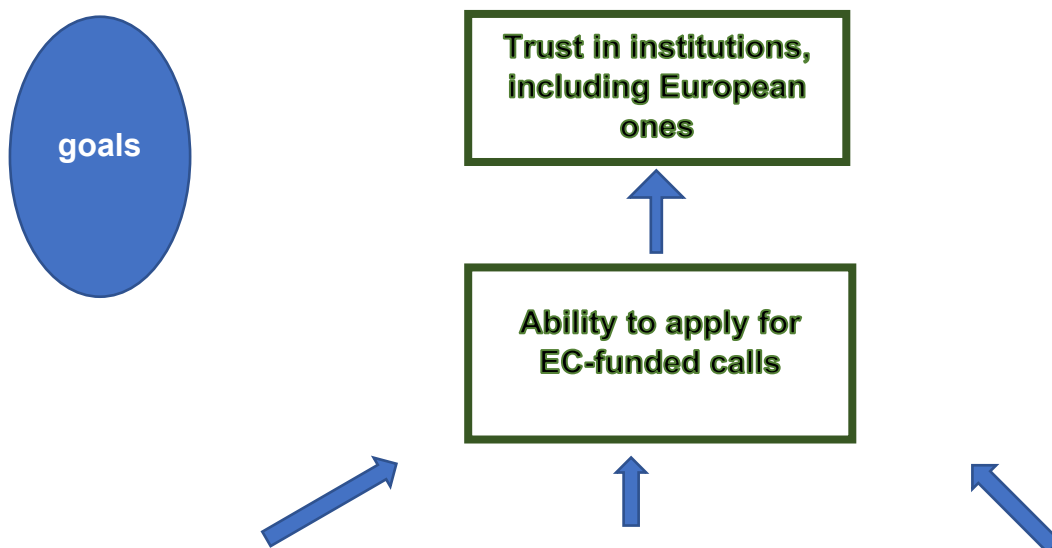
- External data: a number of comparative analyses of the communication strategies implemented by member states revealed recurring problems and critical issues: insufficient coordination of communication activities, lack of involvement of beneficiaries in communication, lack of proactive engagement with journalists and opinion leaders, but above all the use of overly technical language that obliges potential beneficiaries to turn to professionals (often consultants or corporate accountants) who possess (not always appropriately) the knowledge to untangle the complicated jungle of Eurobureaucracy. The results of the analyses are perfectly in line with the Eurobarometer surveys mentioned above;

- Internal data: (a) analysis of data that acquired in previous communication activities from which it had emerged not only that potential beneficiaries often failed to be informed about possible funding lines but also that, having come to know them, they could not understand how to access the call because of the complexity of the procedures and the language used; b) CATI (Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing) survey commissioned as part of the Interim Evaluation Report of the ERDF ROP from which it was found that the owners/managers of companies receiving funding granted were rarely aware of the funding received as they left the management of it all to consultants/commercialists; c) direct knowledge of the reference context.

At this point, I identified the **problem tree** related to the issue of “why don’t citizens trust institutions, starting with European institutions?” The resulting problem tree is very complex and includes various areas. In this paper we will limit the areas of intervention (strategy) to the lack of ability that potential beneficiaries have to access the calls that grant funding to businesses.



And I turned the negative condition (problem) into a positive condition, that is, I turned the problem into a goal (**goal tree**):



means

Easy language

**Maximum
spread of
information**

**Intensify contacts with
funding structures**

On 30 December 2020, while I was doing my Master's, the Umbria Region published the call "Supporting cultural and creative enterprise projects"¹, open for applications from 15/03/2021 and 15/04/2021.

It seemed an auspicious occasion to proceed with the PCM method and develop a project on that call.

The panorama of stakeholders in the topic immediately seemed very broad, and after a discussion with the relevant Regional Service that was responsible for drafting and managing the call for proposals, I proceeded with the Analysis of Stakeholders involved, asking the following questions:

- Whose problems or opportunities are we analyzing? Subject or groups
- Who will benefit from the call?
- What may be the biggest problem that the stakeholders of the call have?

(stakeholder analysis), essentially identifying the following stakeholders:

Stakeholder and basic characteristics	Interests and how affected by the problem	Capacity and motivation to bring about change	Possible actions to address stakeholder interests
Micro, small and medium enterprises	-have project ideas -lack of financial readiness -lack of knowledge of grant mechanisms	Access funds to develop ideas	Provide support to prepare and submit funding applications
Self-employed professionals	-have project ideas -lack of financial readiness -lack of knowledge of grant mechanisms	Access funds to develop ideas	Provide support to prepare and submit funding applications
All entities acting as a business: associations, foundations, etc.	-have project ideas -lack of financial readiness -lack of knowledge of grant mechanisms	Access funds to develop ideas	Provide support to prepare and submit funding applications

¹ DD 12900 DEL 30/12/2020

The region's municipalities	-Presence of many "cultural containers" that are difficult to manage -Need to develop entrepreneurship to revitalize the area	-Maintain municipal artistic and cultural heritage without economic loss the -Developing entrepreneurship in its territory	Involvement in the phase of presentation of the call for proposals.
Professional orders	-Need to train professionals with skills required in the marketplace -Be able to assist its members in European project planning	Understanding the mechanisms for accessing European funds	Identifying referral channels to ask for information
Trade associations	- Become a point of reference for its members	Be able to advise their members	Active involvement with regional services
Journalists	Understand how EC funding works	Information multipliers Monitor the activities of institutions	Maximum clarity of information
Regional services	-Need to communicate appropriately -Work with competent individuals	Receive properly formulated projects Avoid repeating the same information many times	-Correctly manage EC funds

I then moved on to discussions with the regional structure in charge of the cultural sector and, using empathy maps, I asked myself a series of key questions:

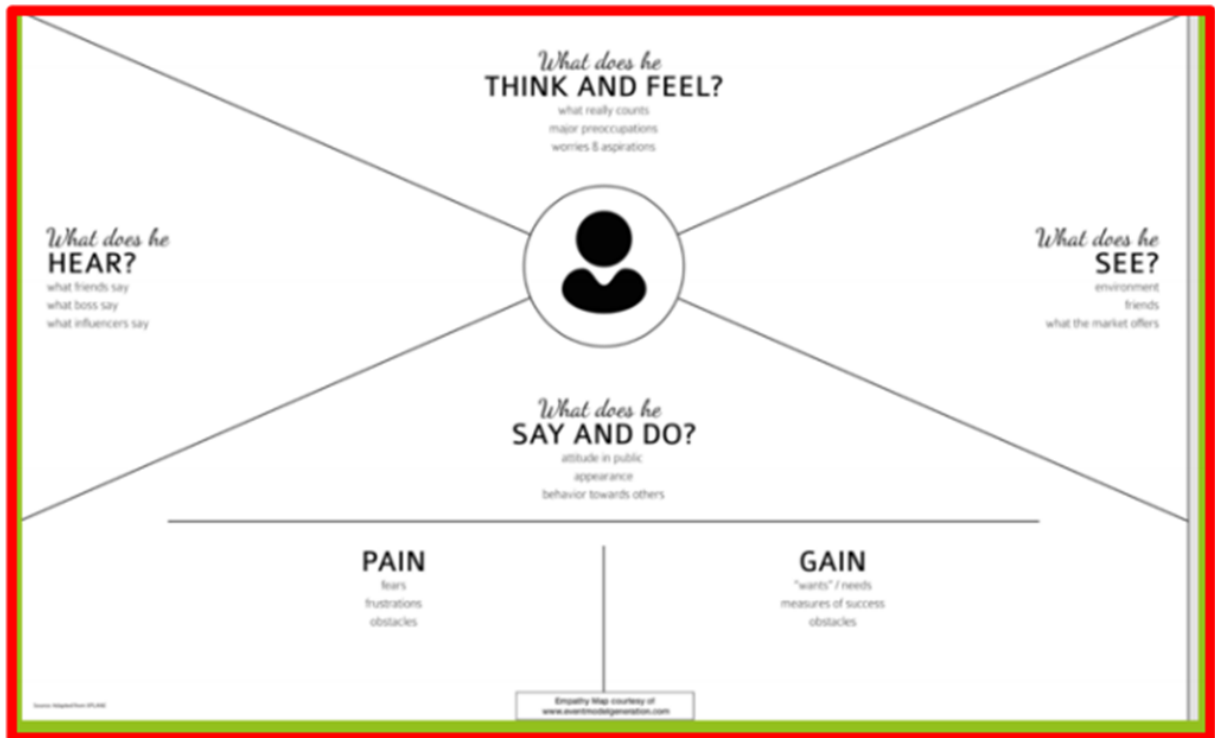
- Who are my stakeholders? Those identified in the stakeholders analysis (excluding Regional Services).

- If I were in their place, what would stimulate my interest? A straightforward explanation of what the call funds, the opportunities I have to access it, and how to access funding

- What are their areas of interest? The cultural and creative sector

- What are the benefits we can bring them? To help them realize their ideas, including within cultural containers owned by municipalities

- What language register to use (also in view of the institutional role we play)? A colloquial tone, but at the same time authoritative



I then came to the identification of the strategy that seemed most appropriate to achieve my purpose, and I identified it as the creation of a video-tutorial that, with simple and immediate language, would explain the contents of the call for proposals and help cultural and creative enterprises and businesses to correctly fill out applications for access to funding.

The decision to make a video, rather than another communication tool is based on several considerations:

- Ours is a society of images, just think that in the Middle Ages an ordinary person came into contact with about 40 artificial images (writing, painting, sculpture, etc.) in the course of a lifetime. Today we are in contact with about 600,000 artificial images a day;
- According to the most accredited studies on memory and learning, we remember (on average) 10% of what we read; 20% of what we hear; 30% of what we see and 50% of what we see and hear;
- Videos are the new trend line in communication for the general public supported by both the European Commission and the Agency for Territorial Cohesion.

To make sure that I am constantly monitoring the project, I have set achievement indicators:

Activity	Achievement Indicator	Expected value
Interdepartmental meetings	Participation of all interested people	3
Presentation seminars	Event carried out	1

Channels on which to publish video	Number of channels	4
Evaluation document	document	1
Views of video	number	300

And indicators of the outcome:

Instrument	Results indicator	Expected value
People participating relative to number invited	Number of participants at seminar/number invited	50%
People making positive rating of videotutorial	Number of people viewing video/number who rated it positively	60%

I reached the design phase, with the following timeline

1	Weeks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
	Planning of videotutorial															
task 1																
task 2																
task 3																
task 4																
task 5																
task 6																
task 7																

Milestones: coordination meetings + seminar + evaluation report

Task 1: Study the call for proposals, and analyse the key elements that would allow us to make pages/slides.

Upon completion of the analysis, we had an initial discussion (meeting) with the Regional Service that drafted the call for proposals.

Task 2: Once the content pages were identified, we moved on to the task of “translating” the call for proposals into simple, understandable terms with the various steps necessary to compile the call for proposals. This was the most difficult phase of the work because, by unavoidable necessity, the notice is almost always complicated and problematic to interpret. On this point we sought support from the Regional Service that had been responsible for drafting and managing the notice. In this I was helped by the outline of the elements of the notice explained to us during the Master’s course.

Gli elementi della comunicazione



Once the slides illustrating the call were (laboriously) prepared, we arrived at the third task, for which I relied on the support of colleagues more experienced with graphics, who made the video in various versions: a longer one without audio (3 minutes), to assist potential beneficiaries at each stage of the presentation; a shorter “promo” version (45 seconds) for sharing in social channels; we then added a version with audio (for the blind) of about 6 minutes. Below are the chosen graphics:



The need to keep the video as short as possible while still guiding potential beneficiaries step by step in filling out applications stems from two different considerations: the first is that average attention spans are getting shorter and shorter;

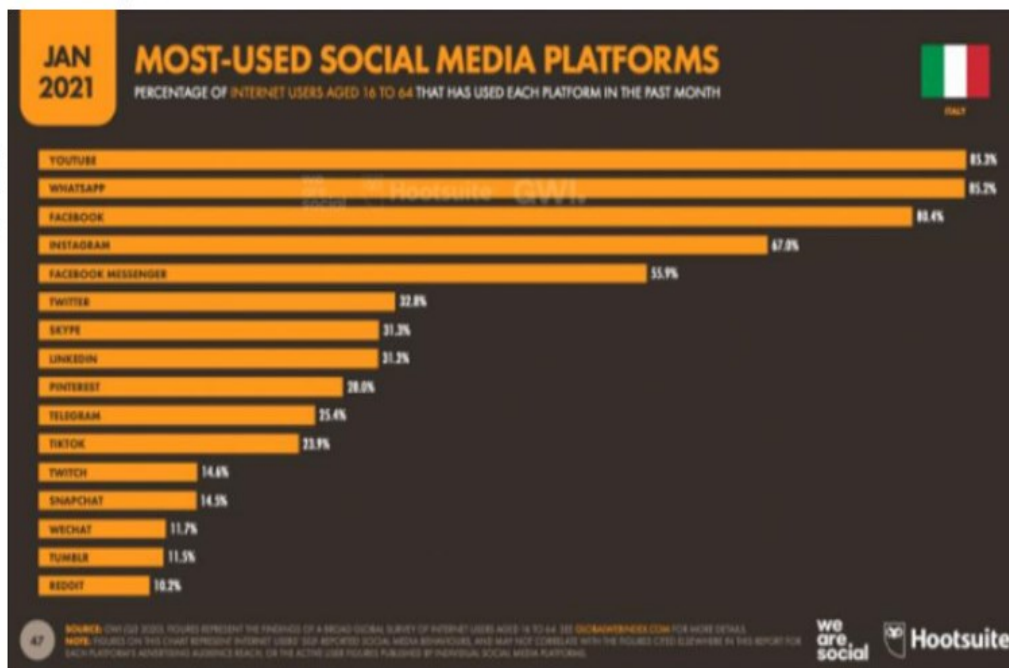
the second is that more and more communication is going through social media, so there was a need for a video that could be easily shared through social media. On this point, it is interesting to make some considerations.

Data from “We are social 2021”² show that:

- 66% of the world’s population (5.22 billion) uses cell phones, with an annual growth of 1.8% (93 million)
- 59.5% of the world’s population (4.66 billion) uses the Internet, with growth in the previous year of 7.3%
- 53% of the world’s population (4.20 billion) uses social media, with an annual growth of 13%
- The average user is on line for about 7 hours per day (and constantly increasing: up a quarter hour per day relative to the previous year)

Italian data are perfectly in line with global data. Below is a look at the most used social media in Italy:

Youtube
Whatsapp
Facebook



FONTE
<https://wearesocial.com/it/digital-2021-italia>

The result was a video that, in the shortest possible time, could explain both the content of the call and the steps to access it, and that could also be easily viewed from a cell phone.

The fourth task was to identify distribution channels. On this point our activity was very limited by the Region’s modest social activity. The channels used were:

- [Portale POR FESR](#)

² FONTE <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2021>

- [Portale Cultura](#)
- [Canale YouTube POR FESR](#)
- [Pagina Facebook Regione Umbria](#)
- [Pagina Facebook Più Umbria con l'Europa](#)
- [Pagina Facebook Assessore regionale alla politica di coesione](#)
- [Pagina facebook dell'Agenzia Coesione Territoriale](#)
- [Portale Agenzia Coesione Territoriale](#)
- [Rete whatsapp dei comunicatori FESr e FSE nazionale](#)

The fifth task consisted of uploading the videos to the distribution channels.

At this point, we arrived at the contact phase (sixth task) with potential beneficiaries (identified with the stakeholder analysis), making a mailing list of individuals invited to the presentation of the call. The presentation meeting was held on March 8, 2021 (seventh task), at which the call for proposals was explained more extensively and we took the opportunity to submit to those present an online form with useful data to be able to make the evaluation of the result of the videotutorial.

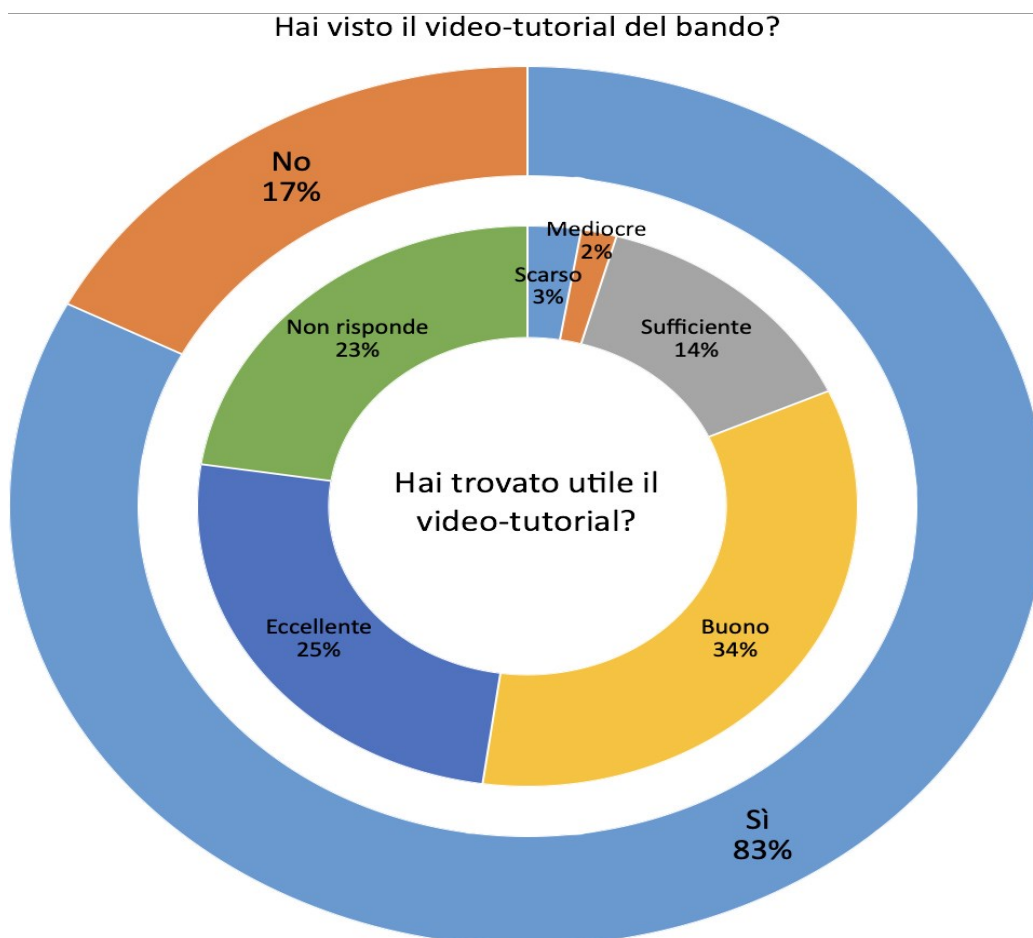
From the results obtained we then drew an evaluation document for internal use (eighth task) that also allows us to have progressive indicators of the project:

Video-tutorial views³

Short Video	Video without Audio	Video with Audio	TOTAL
123	239	635	997

³ Dati al 20 Ottobre 2021. Di seguito i dati a Maggi 2021:

Video in Pillole	Video Senza Audio	Video con Audio	TOT.
123	178	435	736



83% of respondents said the videotutorial was useful

Going back to the table of achievement indicators, I was thus able to monitor the data:

Task	Achievement Indicator	Expected value	Value achieved
Interdepartmental meetings	Participation of all interested people	3	3
Presentation seminars	Event carried out	1	1
Channels on which to publish video	Number of channels	4	6 ⁴

⁴ Oltre ai canali previsti (sito Internet POR FESR, Pagine Facebook Regione Umbria, Pagine Facebook Assessore Politiche di coesione, Youtube POR FESR) il video è stato inserito nella Pagina Facebook dell'Agazia della Coesione e nel gruppo Whatsapp dei [Rete italiana dei comunicatori FESR e FSE](#) ed inserito nel numero 2 della [Rivista Cohesion Magazine della Agazia per la Coesione Territoriale – numero di Giugno 2021](#)

Evaluation document	document	1	1
Views of video	number	300	997 ⁵

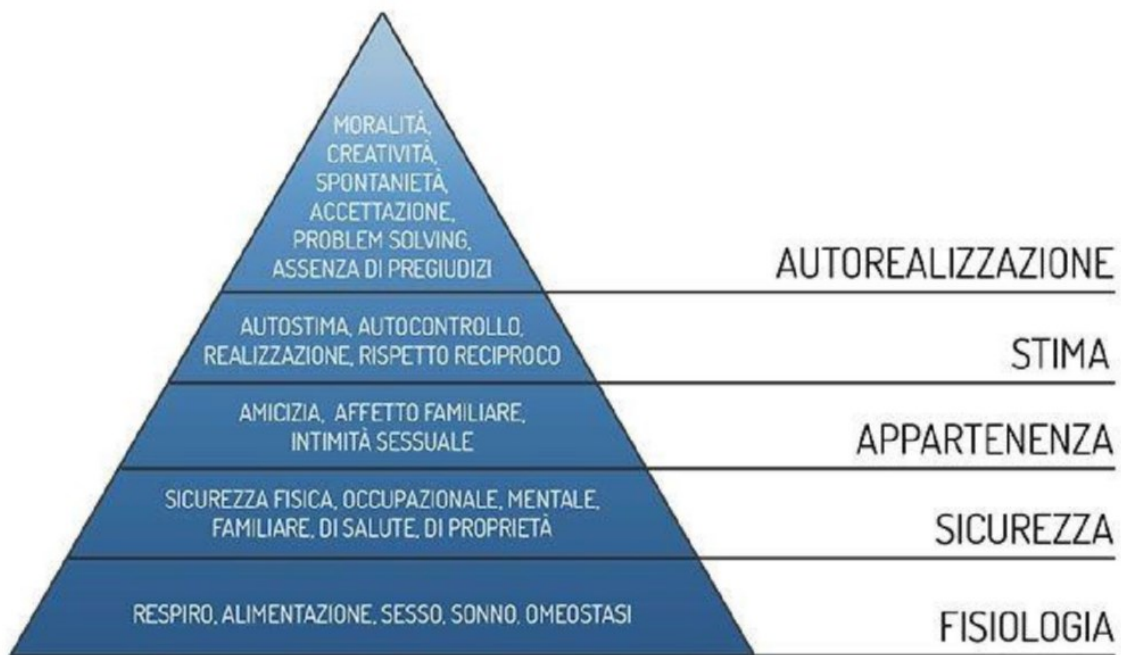
With reference to the result indicators, the following data are reported:

Instrument	Achievement Indicator	Expected value	Value achieved
People participating relative to number invited	Number of participants at seminar/number invited	50%	56%
People making positive rating of videotutorial	Number of people viewing video / number who rated it positively	60%	83%

Analysis of the usefulness of the project for the PA: through the project, the Public Administration has engaged in an open manner with citizens and businesses; it has implemented a type of “two-way” communication, attentive to participation and consensus and no longer limited to “information” alone. Traditionally, the activity of the Regional Services is limited to the publication of the notice in the Official Bulletin of the Region and the concomitant inclusion on its website (information); with this project, the Region has established a two-way contact with its “users,” trying to interpret their real needs and requirements, and opening a channel of communication of which it has then monitored the results (as-is-to be).

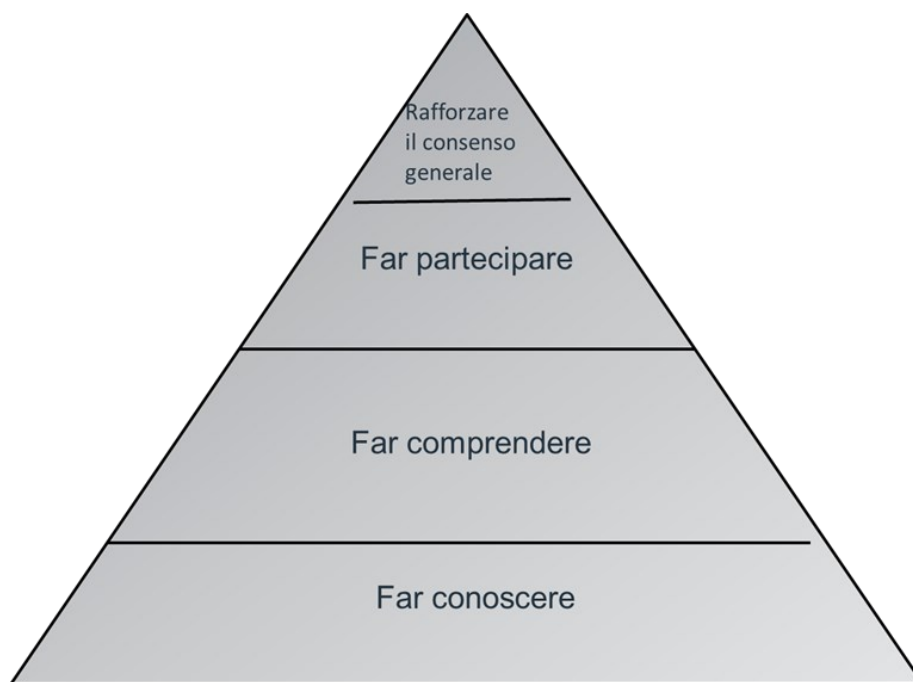
On the subject, the study related to the “pyramid of needs” described in the mid-1900s by occupational psychologists (Abraham Maslow 1908 -1970) is useful.

⁵ Il dato a maggio 2021 (momento dell’analisi di valutazione era di 736 visualizzazioni)



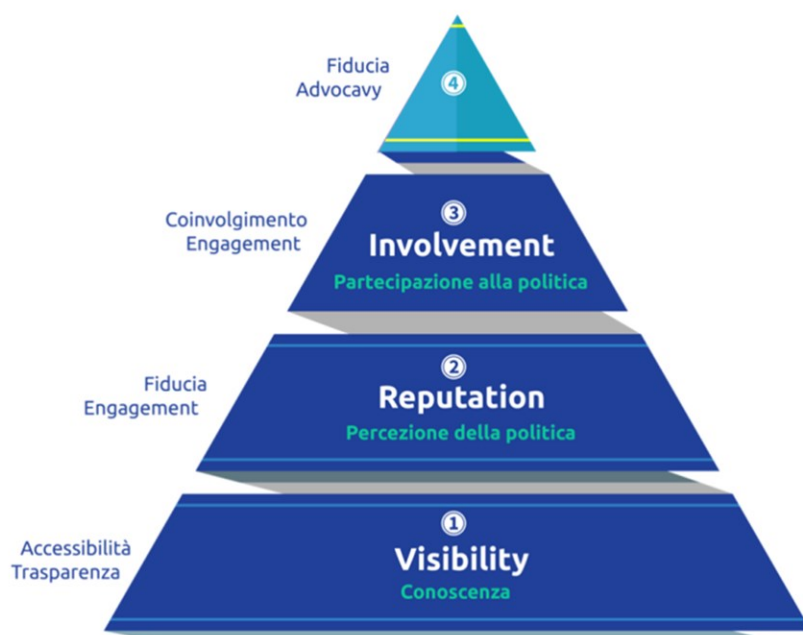
PIRAMIDE DEI BISOGNI DI MASLOW (1954)

I applied the same formula to the communication of structural funds:



And I have also found evidence of this in studies carried out on behalf of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion in view of 2021 - 2027⁶programming

⁶ Fonte. F. Molica- R. Paciello, Incontro InformItalia – Napoli, 16 febbraio 2018



Here is the swot analysis evaluating the project:

<p>STRENGTHS (+)</p>	<p>WEAKNESSES (-)</p>
<p>Availability of own communication channels</p> <p>Availability of staff capable of using graphics software</p> <p>Ease of exchange of ideas between regional departments</p> <p>Existing expertise in the field of institutional communication</p>	<p>Difficulty translating the technical terms of the notice into plain language</p> <p>Need to explain all the complicated steps in the call for proposals</p> <p>Limited use of social media by the regional authority</p>
<p>OPPORTUNITIES (+)</p>	<p>THREATS (-)</p>
<p>Growing interest of the European Commission on the communication of structural funds.</p> <p>Increased use of social/IT tools (pandemic).</p> <p>Interest from the cultural world in funding for the sector.</p>	<p>Necessarily long time to understand the contents of the call for proposals</p> <p>Difficulty in reaching the right target audience</p> <p>Superficiality of analysis by potential beneficiaries</p>

Since this was a “self-produced” video, the Regional Administration did not incur any additional costs (other than employee salaries) for the production and distribution of the video. The only cost incurred was for organization of the video conference for the presentation of the call, but in this the Region paid the price for the digital and IT unpreparedness with which it faced the 2020-2021 health emergency. To give more visibility to the video, it might have been appropriate to purchase tagged posts in the most appropriate social media, which in this case were definitely Facebook and Instagram. The benefit to the region’s image...

The product was immediately replicated by the regional administration, which advocated the creation of another product “Umbria Aperta - Bando per il Sostegno alle Imprese Ricettive” (Open Umbria - Call for Support for Receptive Enterprises), which was realized in May 2021 following the same modalities as the “Call for Support for Cultural and Creative Enterprises”

Identification of points of contact with other PAs: At the national level there has been strong sharing of the product with the Structural Funds Communicators Network (coordinated by the Agency for Territorial Cohesion), both through a whatsapp chat of communicators and through social media; at the European level the video may be the subject of sharing within the Inform Network at the next meeting in December.