



Evaluation of measures for the high-profile implementation of the Operational Programme ERDF Thuringia 2014 to 2020

Brief summary



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Evaluation subject and mandate

The European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) aims to strengthen the economic and social cohesion in the European Union by correcting imbalances between its regions. To raise publicity for the ERDF in Thuringia and to provide information to potential beneficiaries on funding possibilities, many varied public relation campaigns are implemented by the ERDF managing authority in the context of the Operational Programme ERDF Thuringia 2014-2020 (ERDF-OP Thuringia).

The communication strategy for the ERDF Thuringia provides the framework for the information and communication measures, which are implemented as part of the OP Thuringia. These include, among others, holding events, ERDF internet presence, making publications available as well as distributing information and advertising material. The information and communication measures are directed at both the general public and beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries, as well as economic and social partners and policy makers.

The need to evaluate measures for the publicity-raising implementation of the ERDF OP Thuringia (specific objective 16) derives from reporting obligations in accordance with Regulation (EC) 1303 / 2013 Article 54 Paragraph 1 and Article 56 Paragraph 3. The purpose of the evaluation is not only to take into account the obligations outlined to the European Commission. On the contrary, it offers the possibility for the managing authority to obtain important information regarding the realisation of their regional aims and objectives to raise awareness of the European Union and the ERDF in the population of Thuringia.

The evaluation of information and communication measures currently being implemented enables valuable findings and information to be derived for the structuring of communication work in the funding period 2021-2027.

Methodology and work steps

Three phases of evaluation with the key research and work steps

1. Analysis and Survey

In a first step we carried out a thorough analysis of the information available regarding the information and communication measures implemented. Additionally, we conducted our own surveys to obtain further information. Initially, we created an *overview matrix*, which summarises all the information and communication measures implemented by the ERDF managing authority. Additional information could be recorded in a *preliminary talk* with the responsible colleagues in the ERDF managing authority, as well as with the media agency accompanying public relations work. Furthermore, we have considered the *output and results indicators* for the specific objective 16. In order to determine the degree of awareness of the ERDF in Thuringia and thus the value for the results indicator in the specific objective 16, we have commissioned the opinion research institute INSA-CONSULERE to conduct a *representative population survey*. As part of the survey phase, we also conducted an *online survey* of the beneficiaries.

2. Theory-based analysis

Based on findings from the analysis and the surveys, we assessed the measures implemented using a theory-based analysis in a second step. We have taken into account the selected categories as well as the implemented measures in their concrete design and implementation. As part of the *criteria-based rating* we considered the requirements for information and communication measures resulting from the different target groups (general public, potential beneficiaries, beneficiaries, multipliers). Based on this, we compiled an *interim report*.

3. Identification of optimisation potentials and development of recommendations for action

In a third step, we finally identified potential for optimisation and recommendations for action concerning the future implementation of information and communication measures in the ERDF Thuringia. The evaluation results (interim report) were presented by us in an *interactive workshop* with the ERDF managing authority as well as selected protagonists. All participants involved in this digital workshop jointly discussed and developed solutions and specific potential for optimisation as well as recommendations for action.

The following illustration visualises an overview of the approach in the assessment of the communication strategy.

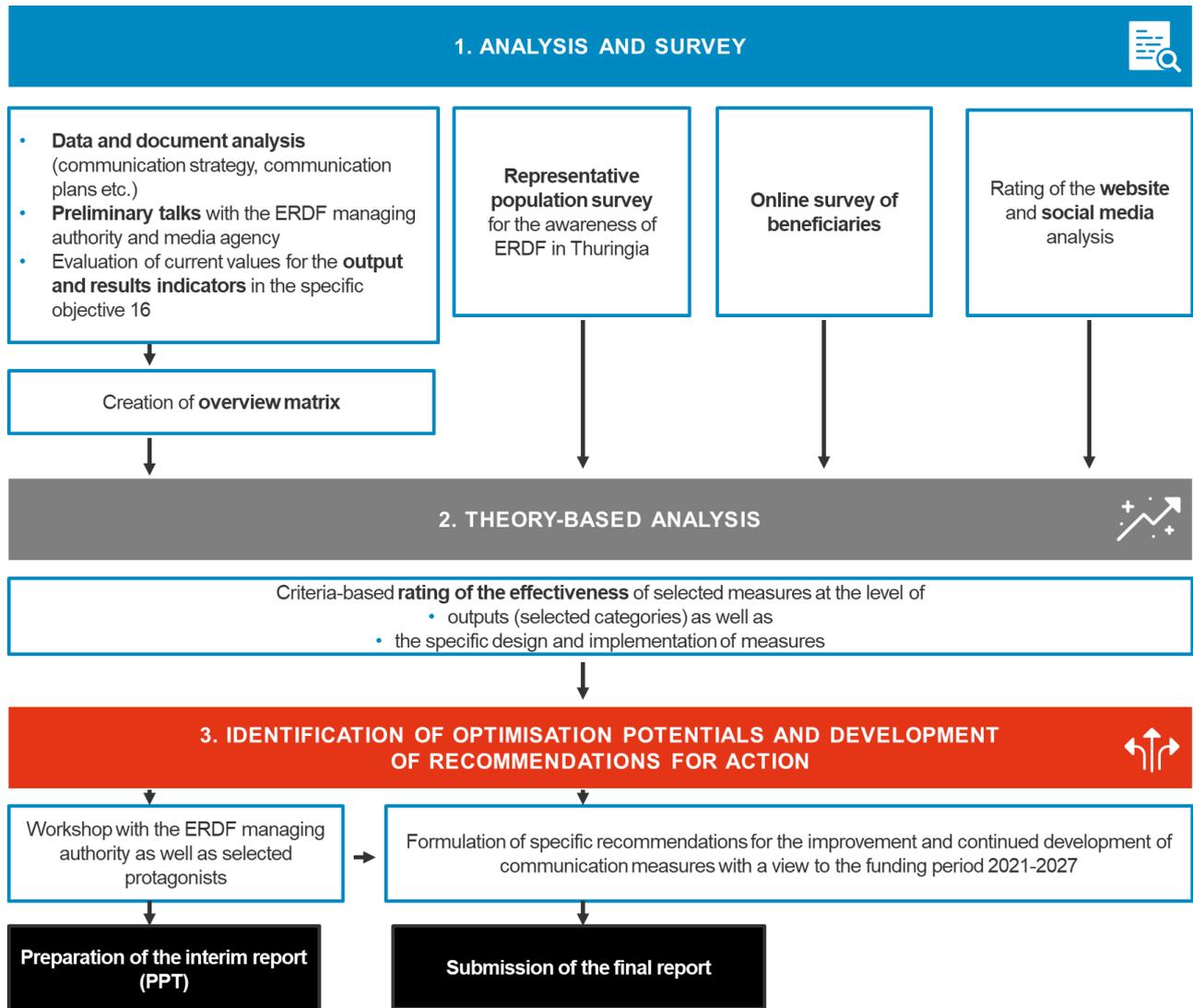


Illustration: Research and work steps

Source: Own presentation Ramboll Management Consulting.

Core findings of the population survey

In order to gain an impression in view of developing the awareness of the ERDF among the general public, a representative survey of the Thuringian population is conducted every three years in accordance with the ERDF OP. Results of the population survey reveal evidence on the effectiveness of the information and communication measures with regard to the general public. The general public covers both professionally interested citizens and those who have no direct point of contacts with the issues of funding and economic or regional policy in general.

The ERDF as a specific funding programme is known to around a third (32 percent) of Thuringian citizens. This value corresponds to the awareness of the ERDF in the last population survey from 2018. The reasons for the prominence of the ERDF in Thuringia are most likely complex. On the one hand, the fact that with ERDF funding important topics from everyday life are addressed to a large part of the population, should contribute to the high profile. Here, this particularly includes the issues of climate protection and flood control, but also the support for SMEs. But as with other topics too, research and innovation as well as the development of town, cities and suburban areas, these are definitely topics which occupy an important role in the everyday life of many people.

The survey results show that only about a fifth of the population has already heard of a specific EU co-financed project, which improves the residential area. It demonstrates that younger people in Thuringia have heard of EU co-financed projects for the improvement of the residential area clearly more often than older people have. In the area of urban development and flood control, the projects will also be more frequently visible and tangible for people who do not have points of contact for professional purposes. In projects such as these, information boards and posters are presumably effective means to draw attention to the (co)financing by the EU.

It becomes clear from the results that the first-mentioned four sources: Internet, television, newspapers, and radio, are of particular importance. At the same time, this also involves communication channels with decidedly diverse and extensive offers. Positioning their own measures so that they are noticed by as many people as possible, poses a huge challenge.

Evaluation of measures for high-profile implementation

Information and communication measures of the ERDF managing authority

The overview of the output indicators shows progress for all indicators in terms of the defined objective for 2023. In three of the four indicators the target values already indicate the objective has been achieved. As this involves indicators which are used by the managing authority, it is very safe to assume that the target values also correspond to the actual later values and the objectives are thus reached. For one indicator only (number of workshops for communication and information) the current values show that additional activities are required, in order to reach the target value envisaged. This appears very possible in view of the remaining time to the end of the funding period. Achievement of objectives in the specific objective 16 can thus be rated as very good overall.

Achievement of objectives output indicators specific objective 16 (21/07/2020)

Output indicator	Target value (21/07/2020)	Actual value (21/07/2020)	Objective (2023)
P15.5 Number of meetings for information exchange, specialist conferences, annual events	55	12	50
P15.6 Number of workshops for communication and information	2	4	7
P15.7 Number of communication projects	20	11	20
P15.8 Access to ERDF web pages	66,500	34,306	66,500

Table: Achievement of objectives output indicators specific objective 16 (21/07/2020)

Source: ERDF managing authority

Events

The managing authority organised as of 2015 one single large individual measure per year in the category of events: periodic annual events. At the ERDF annual events in the years 2015 to 2020, information on the status of programme implementation was provided, besides raising awareness for the financing options and the strategies followed. The successes achieved with the Operational Programme as well as larger projects, joint action plans and other project examples were presented to the public to raise awareness.

At the beginning of the funding period 2014-2020 the ERDF launch event in December 2014 was used to communicate the start of the ERDF programme and to inform the general public, alongside (potential) beneficiaries and multipliers.

The ERDF managing authority participated in high-profile events in Thuringia with publications, information and advertising material, in order to be able to reach the general public, in particular, even more – for example, with an ERDF information desk during European week or by participating in the Federal and State campaign and the corresponding kick-off event “Europe in my region”.

Cooperation with supporters (multipliers), such as the European Information Centre or agencies of the EU Commission has been intensified.

Recommendations for optimisation

- Continuation of events as a key communication measure, in order to make funding tangible and accessible. Also increasingly use digital formats.
- Furthermore, strong participation in events by other protagonists, in order to maximise the multiplier potential, to establish and maintain networks. Beneficiaries may be invited (or included elsewhere) to report on their project.
- Several small events with a variety of topics, in order to continue raising the profile of the ERDF.
- Accompany all events to a greater extent with active press relations. Multiple use of text and image on social medial channels.
- Provide more information on funding opportunities and eligibility conditions at all events.

Publications, information and advertising material

In order to raise the profile and awareness of ERDF funding in Thuringia, as well as to increase the interest of the general public and (potential) beneficiaries, the ERDF administration uses (various) print formats such as leaflets, brochures and advertising material (updated every year) to various points of interest (POI), including the European Information Centre of the State Chancellery.

The portfolio of the ERDF advertising material has been adapted and updated on a yearly basis. In 2015 and 2016, that is at the beginning of the funding period, the focus was on two measures for promoting the ERDF: On the one hand, the complete Operational Programme as well as a brief summary of this has been set out at all events with ERDF reference. Simultaneously, a programme of advertising material was designed with general giveaways as well as advertising means relating to the annual event.

Recommendations for optimisation

- Continuation and expansion of publications and information material because they make the ERDF tangible.
- Add more storytelling to the brochures and share the stories behind the project and the path of entrepreneurs by using more emotive images and text.
- Increase the runs of print media and use intermediary bodies with a high volume of public traffic, in order to continue to reach the target groups.
- The portfolio of advertising material can be supplemented by products, which have a fascinating, regional reference (energy, environment, conservation).
- A more intensive integration of multipliers, to distribute a modern portfolio of advertising materials even further.

Press and public relations, media presence

Since the beginning of the funding period, press and PR activities and measures to increase presence in the media landscape have been implemented, with the aim of raising awareness and arousing interest on the topic of the ERDF: Press releases and press articles, poster campaigns, articles in the magazine "WIR" of the TMWWDG (The Thuringian Ministry for Economic Affairs, Science and Digital Society), newsletters, concept paper visibility increase. These measures aim to communicate, in particular, the diversity of funding opportunities. This is intended to specifically raise the profile of the ERDF in the public eye.

From the population survey conducted for the awareness of the ERDF in Thuringia, it becomes clear that the initial contact on the topic of ERDF is primarily made via two channels: 22 percent indicated that they have heard or read about the ERDF via the internet or via local or regional newspapers. Also significant is the finding that 57 percent of respondents use newspapers as a primary source to find out about the news in their region. In this respect, press still plays a big role in the transmission of information.

Recommendations for optimisation

- Accompany all activities of the managing authority ERDF to a greater extent with active press relations. Multiple use of text and image on social medial channels.
- Continue with poster campaigns, use for rural areas too. Use modern formats such as moving buttons.
- Newsletters and press releases are well suited for addressing selected target audiences and distributing information on ERDF funding in a targeted manner.
- Expansion of newsletter concept.
- In order to ensure a balanced cost-benefit ratio, text and images in the newsletter can be reused in social networks.

Internet presence (website)

On the ERDF Thuringia website, information about the funding is generally provided, in order to publicise the programme in Thuringia and the added value for the region. Also, there are support measures for (potential) beneficiaries. Among others, the website visitors are provided with information on the ERDF, funding priorities, current notifications and event notes as well as information on supported projects. Documents and materials, such as for example guidelines, regulations, reports, guides or logos to support public relations work are available to download from the website.

The ERDF website also includes an interactive map providing an overview of the ERDF funding in Thuringia. Users thus receive a direct ERDF reference on their region and can track which regions in Thuringia receive how much means from the ERDF and what the funding is used for. The website aims to address the general public and (potential) beneficiaries and provide information about the ERDF. With a potentially high reach and a low-threshold access, the website thus offers ideal basic prerequisites to reach the objectives above.

The analysis of the design, content, web text, navigation and interaction options shows that the website already rates as good or very good for many of the criteria applied. The website has already been updated with the relaunch in August 2020. There are also possibilities to continue improving the website, in order to further increase the ease of use and to communicate the relevant information about the ERDF funding in Thuringia even more effectively.

Internet presence (social media strategy)

The technical possibilities of social media are enormous and allow the comparatively easy integration of images, animations and videos etc. into the information and communication measures. Also, reference can be made to articles easily, e.g. by using hashtags, and users have the option to share articles and achieve an even greater reach.

At the same time, it should be considered that social media involves a certain type of communication or reporting. Which social media and which topics are suitable in the context of ERDF funding must be weighed up carefully.

This applies, on the one hand, with regard to the target groups of information and communication measures, and on the other hand to the limited resources which are available to the ERDF managing authority for implementation. Up to now, the state of Thuringia has not operated any social media channels for the ERDF. In addition to using their own social media channels for the ERDF, there is also essentially the option to use existing regional pages or channels.

Recommendations for optimisation of internet presence (website; social media strategy)

- Offer even greater target-group-specific preparation of content and assistance or better orientation via FAQs or tutorials.
- Design interactive map even more clearly and present specific projects in an even more accessible way with images and appealing text via the map.
- Use feedback form to gather direct responses from the users and to be able to respond to the needs of users quickly and specifically.
- Check accessibility and read-out function.
- Set current notifications to be received more frequently in the area of news and event information, in order to keep the site up to date.
- Development of social media strategy.

Guidance for beneficiaries in terms of fulfilling publicity requirements

In order to support the beneficiaries in the implementation of information and communication measures, so that these can fulfil the European specifications and thus contribute to raising the awareness of funding, materials are made available and measures are implemented on an ongoing basis by the ERDF managing authority. These aim to inform the beneficiaries on the European specifications with regard to the implementation of information and communication measures.

The results of the online survey show that the materials for supporting the implementation of their information and communication reporting requirements by the ERDF managing authority are rated by survey respondents as predominantly useful. More than half rate the benefits as rather high, and in addition, 20 or 25 percent of respondents rate the benefits of both products as very high. 75 to 80 percent indicate a very high or high benefit.

Recommendations for optimisation

- In order to raise awareness of the support measures for beneficiaries, it would seem appropriate to position these even more prominently or to emphasise the measures.
- The opportunity to be able to reach a personal contact person, possibly in a limited period – but even so – it would be an added value for the beneficiaries.

Information and communication measures of the beneficiaries

In addition to the compulsory measures, the beneficiaries implement numerous further measures, which they use to report their ERDF-funded project to the public. In order to gain a clearer impression of these measures, beneficiaries were asked in the online survey which voluntary measures they specifically implement.

It shows that a very high proportion of respondents implement additional measures. The measures particularly include, as expected, informal exchanges and a comprehensive description of the project on their own website. Particularly noteworthy is that a high proportion of survey respondents implement elaborate measures, such as the organisation of their own events, the active participation in events of others as well as the use of print media.

Conclusion and recommendations

Overall, the diversity and maturity of information and communication measures of the ERDF Thuringia are particularly positive aspects. The ERDF managing authority implements target-group-specific information and communication measures with a high level of commitment. By means of the continued development of existing and the conception of new measures, the ERDF managing authority thus constantly ensures an optimisation of information and communication measures.

Special emphasis is placed here on adapting to the changing conditions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the conceptual and technical restructuring of the annual event in 2020 into an entertaining, modern and impactful hybrid event seems to be taking great shape. The realisation of this format sets the course for the coming years to increasingly offer digital formats, and shows that a successful implementation with new tools and digital products is possible and very positively received. These experiences are valid for the new funding period.

In the conception and realisation of classic and new formats, the managing authority is accompanied professionally by a regional communication and digital agency.

Recommendations for optimisation covering a number of measures

- **Checking of measures and target groups**

We recommend a measure check in light of the findings from this evaluation: Which measures are (still) effective and where, which measures no longer make it into the new communication strategy. We recommend, prior to the start of the next funding period, taking the time for brainstorming and setting clear aims and objectives with regard to the information and communication measures in a moderated workshop and sharpening these further.

- **Initiate and maintain multiplier network/multiplier list**

A targeted circle, a targeted network circle can be set up and actively addressed. The multipliers regularly receive information material (in analogue or digital form) and are provided with information and news in regular digital updates (in the form of newsletters). These particular multipliers are also regularly invited to events as experts.

- **Development of a social media strategy**

Digital media consumption and distribution of information and messages via social networks are increasing. We recommend in the next communication strategy strengthening the appropriate channels and strategies even further and using them proactively for the objectives that have be met.

- **More targeted information on funding opportunities and eligibility conditions**

The measures are still barely accompanied by information on funding opportunities and eligibility conditions. At the events and in the measures accompanying the

events, such as brochures, banners, flyers, there are no or few eye-catching guidelines for getting involved with the ERDF and in the possibility of funding. Here the idea of “Flying Lots” could be adopted and established.

- **Continuation and development of the existing press relations of the ERDF managing authority**

The existing press relations of the managing authority should be continued and expanded, to continue informing the population at large about the funding. The press offices of the intermediary bodies aim to transport the topic of ERDF activity further, to develop and prepare information material for the press, if necessary.