



Evaluation Support Study on the Information Policy on the Common Agricultural Policy

Executive summary

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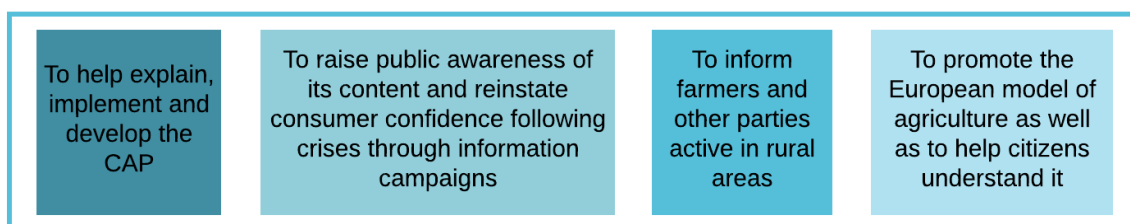
The United Kingdom withdrew from the European Union as of 1 February 2020. During the transition period, which ends on 31 December 2020, Union law, with a few limited exceptions, continues to be applicable to and in the United Kingdom and any reference to Member States in Union law shall be understood as including the United Kingdom.

OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE

The aim of this evaluation is to examine the relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency and EU added value of the information policy on the Common Agricultural Policy (henceforth referred to as the CAP). The information policy on the CAP is implemented by the European Commission, on the basis of Article 6 and Article 45 of Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 17 December 2013 on the financing, management and monitoring of the CAP. The evaluation study focuses on the period 2016–2020 (the “evaluation period”).

BACKGROUND

Article 6 of Regulation (EU) No 1306/2013 identifies information measures as being one of the activities that may be financed from the funds of the CAP, while Article 45 specifies the objectives of the information measures and outlines the details with regard to how these can be implemented. The specific objectives of the information measures are listed in the figure below.



Every five years, European Commission’s Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI) develops an external communication strategy for the CAP, in which specific communication objectives, target groups, main messages and communication tools are defined. The most recent communication strategy (2016- 2020) clearly distinguishes between two different types of audiences: stakeholders and the general public. Five priority audience segments are identified in the strategy: school children and teachers; citizens visiting fairs/specific events; young people (as part of the general public); beneficiaries of the CAP; and multipliers (as part of stakeholders).

DG AGRI employs a two-fold approach to reach its target audiences. First, DG AGRI implements communication actions directly via a number of communication tools. Second, DG AGRI engages with and provides support to multipliers to draw on their resources and capacity in achieving its communication goals. Overall, DG AGRI employs a wide spectrum of communication tools including media networking, social media activities, a web presence, and the organisation of and participation in events such as conferences and fairs. Information measures may be implemented: 1) directly at the initiative of the Commission; 2) by third parties, via co-financed (up to 60%) grants. The third parties applying for grants include organisations at both EU and national levels, ranging from public to private bodies as well as different NGOs/associations. Various activities are financed, notably information campaigns, audio-visual productions, events (e.g. conferences, seminars, workshops) and others.

Furthermore, DG AGRI contributes, both financially and in terms of content, to EU corporate communication. This has been developed since 2013, based on the general objectives of the European Union, to ensure that the European Commission is able to communicate its over-arching priorities to a wide audience in a clear, coherent and cost-effective way. DG AGRI is a major contributor to the budget of the EU corporate communication (~40% of the overall budget during the evaluation period). The Commission’s corporate communication is organised via specific communication campaigns, focusing on diverse topics and targeted at different audiences. DG AGRI was involved in providing input and bringing relevant thematic knowledge to the preparation of these corporate communication campaigns.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation sought to answer 14 evaluation study questions covering the five evaluation criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, coherence and EU added value. Multiple data collection and analysis methods were applied to formulate evidence-based answers to the evaluation study questions. These included consultations with stakeholders via interviews and surveys, as well as a thorough overview of documentary sources. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis were used to triangulate the findings and develop conclusions, as well as formulating recommendations for future improvement.

MAIN FINDINGS

Media networking

DG AGRI has managed the Ag-Press network of European agricultural journalists and professional communicators since 2011. DG AGRI organises press trips to the Member States and seminars in Brussels (Commission HQ) for network members.

The evaluation findings show that majority of network members found the press trips, seminars, Ag-Press.eu platform and newsletter to be relevant and interesting. In particular, participation in network activities enabled the establishment of contacts between network members, and also deepened their knowledge of the diversity of agriculture within the EU. Some of the journalists interviewed presented examples of contacting other event participants even after the events, illustrating the sustainability of the activities. The activities of the Ag-Press network also allowed journalists to establish relevant contacts with information sources at European level.

Both the Ag-Press events and the online platform contributed to a large extent towards increased awareness of EU support for agriculture and rural development, as well as increased understanding of the CAP and related topics. Participation in seminars and trips allowed network members to prepare high-quality outputs. A majority of the Ag-Press.eu users surveyed also say that they use the platform to develop stories. The majority of participants prepared an article or another type of output (e.g. video, podcast, radio show) after they had participated in an event, although almost a third of participants did not produce any output. Based on the views of the Ag-Press members surveyed and interviewed, there are difficulties in covering the CAP and related issues, both in the specialised agricultural media, but mainly in the general media. Journalists identified the technical details and complicated nature of the policy as reasons why it is difficult to communicate about the CAP. Qualitative content analysis also showed that while the articles produced after press trips reflected the European dimension of farming, they did not always make a clear connection with the CAP or European support.

The seminars organised by the Ag-Press network had the lowest cost per participant (EUR 997), followed by press trip-seminars (EUR 1 560) and press trips (EUR 1 903). Seminars can be considered the most cost-effective among the three types of event, given that they had the lowest costs and resulted in the largest number of articles being produced. Almost none of the seminar and press trip participants surveyed observed any inefficiencies during the events.

Social media

Social media is used by DG AGRI to inform, engage and enthuse citizens, to tell the stories of farmers, to promote DG AGRI events, and to inform about policy developments among other topics. DG AGRI uses four main channels to promote the CAP and related topics on social media: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. Each of these channels has a slightly different focus in terms of communication approach and target groups. Facebook is mainly used to tell stories about farmers and farming in Europe, and targets the general public. Instagram is targeted at citizens, and is used as a photo

album to highlight good-quality and affordable European food. Twitter, meanwhile, is more news-oriented, targeting stakeholders and journalists. Lastly, YouTube acts mainly as a video repository, and is not used on a daily basis.

The number of DG AGRI Facebook and Twitter followers grew during the evaluation period, and achieved the KPIs set for follower growth in 2016 and 2017. Twitter and Facebook are mostly used by stakeholder organisations and government bodies (based on the replies to the main survey). However, many of the stakeholder organisations interviewed said that they do not follow DG AGRI on social media at all.

DG AGRI's social media was relevant to those who follow it. Around 88% of stakeholders surveyed, and most of those who were interviewed, found the information on social media interesting. This was also supported by the fact that negative feedback on social media posts is very limited. Information provided on DG AGRI's social media contributed to a large extent towards increased awareness of EU support for agriculture and rural development, as well as increased understanding of the CAP and related topics – as evidenced by the replies of respondents to the survey. Information provided by DG AGRI's social media also contributed to some extent to a more positive view of the CAP, with 68.4% of survey respondents agreeing with this statement.

The expenses relating to social media fluctuated during the evaluation period. Between 2016 and 2017, the budget grew mainly due to a substantial increase in the sum allocated to digital communication services. Between 2017 and 2018, the growth occurred due to a doubling of the budget for promoted posts and the recruitment of an online community manager. Subsequently, overall costs shrank slightly in 2019, notably including due to a reduction in the budget for digital communication services. DG AGRI's social media presence (in terms of the number of posts) expanded in line with the growth of its budget. The campaigns analysed for the case studies (the Teachers' Resource Pack and GI campaign) performed efficiently, with the cost per result remaining below the average cost across all industries. Comparison between DG AGRI's Twitter account and those of DG SANTE reveals scope for improvement in the cost-effectiveness of DG AGRI's Twitter. While it performed better than the DG SANTE account focusing on food safety, DG AGRI's Twitter receives fewer impressions than the DG SANTE account that focuses on health.

Website

DG AGRI's web presence has undergone significant changes during the period 2016-2020. These changes were a part of an extensive digital transformation within the Commission. In 2018, DG AGRI began transferring the content from its old website to a new class, 'Food, Farming, Fisheries', on the Commission's website. Under this class, material mainly from two other DGs – SANTE and MARE – is published together with content from DG AGRI.

Most users are satisfied with the quality of the website, and agree that it has a positive impact on their understanding and perception of the CAP. The majority of users agreed that they view the CAP and the European Union more positively after visiting the website. Both survey respondents and interviewees also agreed that the information presented was interesting and extensive. Most respondents visit the website at least once a month, and most do so for work-related purposes. While users perceive the website's content positively, they are less satisfied with its usability. Difficulty in navigating between pages, issues with the website's search function, and limited accessibility in various EU languages were identified as the main issues.

The average cost per visit to DG AGRI's pages on the EUROPA website has decreased during the evaluation period, indicating a positive trend towards efficiency. The average cost per download from the DG AGRI pages on the website is increasing, but this trend has been affected by the process of digital transformation and should therefore not be assessed negatively. DG AGRI allocates a similar amount of funds to its website as does

DG MARE, and less funds than DG SANTE. When compared in terms of cost per visit and cost per download, DG SANTE performs better than DG AGRI.

Events

In line with the external communication strategy for the CAP during the period 2016-2020, DG AGRI hosts conferences and attends agricultural fairs as well as other large-scale events. Each year, DG AGRI holds several major conferences – the annual ‘EU Agricultural Outlook Conference’ and one or two more. In terms of fairs, each year between 2016 and 2019 DG AGRI attended ‘Internationale Grüne Woche’ in Berlin and ‘Salon International de l’Agriculture’ in Paris, as well as several other fairs in the Member States.

Both survey respondents and interviewees found that the conferences organised by DG AGRI met their needs: most of them agreed that the conferences were interesting and relevant for their work. They also agreed that they had gained new and important information about the CAP, and that they made new contacts during these events. Interviews with stakeholders revealed that the EU Agricultural Outlook conference in particular is very well known among the target audiences, who assess it positively. Likewise, most respondents who had visited fairs agreed that the DG AGRI stand was relevant for their work, and that the information they had gained there was important and sufficient. A smaller number of respondents agreed that they gained new information at the stand. This lower figure is explained by the fact that the stand is targeted mainly at the general public, focusing mainly on entertaining but educational activities, and therefore does not aim to provide a comprehensive picture of the CAP and related topics (although DG AGRI policy officers are usually present at the stand to answer policy questions).

The cost per participant for conferences organised by DG AGRI fluctuated during the evaluation period, but was higher than in earlier years. This can be explained by the increased number of conferences organised in various EU countries (rather than in Brussels). When compared with other conferences, the EU Agricultural Outlook conference – despite becoming more expensive every year – was very efficiently organised.

Grants

During the evaluation period, 72 grants were awarded by the European Commission to various organisations, to communicate about the CAP. During these last four years, 22 countries were reached by the activities developed via these grant projects, although different countries were reached to a different extent. Italy, in particular, stands out with a total of 20 grants being implemented in the country; France, Germany, Bulgaria, Romania and Spain can also be considered to have benefitted from a large number of grants. In nine countries, by contrast, activities were carried out under only one or two grants, and in some countries there were none. The grant beneficiaries mainly targeted the general public, young people and stakeholders. The objectives of the projects targeting the general public were to raise awareness of the functioning and content of the CAP, to underline the benefits and challenges relating to agriculture and rural development, and to show that these issues have an impact on many areas (e.g. the environment, food safety, etc.).

Overall, the grant scheme is particularly relevant when considering the needs of the grant applicants and can be regarded as complementary to the efforts of communicating the CAP to the general public in the Member States by both public authorities and other national actors. The grants respond to the needs of the grant applicants for additional resources to implement large-scale communication campaigns and produce high-quality content in line with their working priorities. Without the grants, the scope of the projects would have been more limited, or they would not have happened at all. Based on the results of the grant applicant survey, the projects had various positive influences on their

organisations in relation to the CAP,. The grant recipients improved their communication strategies to inform stakeholders and the general public about the CAP (96%). 82% of recipients also benefitted from cooperation with partner organisations (agricultural cooperatives, news agencies, governmental institutions etc.). As a result of the grants, they were able to strengthen their focus on the CAP (96%), and to continue to inform their target audiences about it (92%). The data available in the grant reports shows that between 62% and 100% of persons across different projects declared an increased awareness of the CAP following project activities in the period 2016-2018. In addition, an average of 82% of individuals stated that they had improved their knowledge of the CAP and related issues. However, these results mostly represent the opinions of participants in events. No comprehensive quantitative studies have been carried out to measure changes in opinions on the CAP overall as a result of the various grant projects. There is, therefore, room for improvement by monitoring the impact of the projects more consistently through opinion surveys.

Overall, the grant application and evaluation process is clearly defined, easy to follow, and works effectively. Applicants particularly appreciated the supporting materials provided by DG AGRI when applying. With regard to the clarity and adequacy of the application form and related requirements, difficulties sometimes arose when using the online system, and the level of details required is assessed by some applicants as not being flexible enough. This is especially relevant for organisations applying for the first time. There is room to increase the popularity of the grant scheme among potential applicants in the Member States, based on the opinions of grant recipients (survey and interviews) and the fact that the same organisations apply for and receive the grants repeatedly (around 36% of all recipients of co-financing received it more than once).

Project management and implementation by DG AGRI are also highly appreciated by the grant beneficiaries. To further improve these aspects, the grant recipients interviewed said they would like to have more flexibility in terms of reporting frequency, planning and editorial changes, transnational exchanges and project length (e.g. the possibility of implementing two-year projects). Grant applicants also said that the possibility of interim and/or advanced payments would be welcome, so that the focus would be more on elaborating relevant and tailor-made activities, rather than on financial constraints.

Assessment of the efficiency of grant projects is substantially affected by the lack of quality monitoring data available. Although almost all of the grant recipients surveyed said that they collected monitoring information, the data that were available were usually limited or not comparable between projects. Grant beneficiaries applied different approaches to collect this data (e.g. using different timeframes, applying different methodologies for counting participants), making comparisons between the projects especially difficult, and in some cases not feasible. Key elements that helped ensure the cost-effectiveness of grant projects included grant beneficiaries having an established online presence, forming partnerships with other stakeholders, and investing in re-usable products.

Achievement of the information policy's general and specific objectives

The combined results of the study suggest that the objectives of the information policy are achieved to a great extent. The information policy on the CAP was successful in improving understanding and perceptions with regard to the CAP. Stakeholder consultation revealed that most of them experienced positive results and impacts of the information policy as a result of the various communication activities. It should also be noted that those stakeholders surveyed who were familiar with various aspects of the CAP evaluate the activities either positively or very positively. This shows that informing the stakeholders about the CAP has the potential to improve their perceptions of the policy.

Based on figures from Eurobarometer and the results of the stakeholder survey, awareness of the CAP has increased over the last five years, and perceptions of its

performance have improved. Nearly three out of four Europeans are aware of the CAP, and consider it as benefitting all citizens, not just farmers. In 2020, more citizens agree that the CAP fulfils its role and contributes to the EU's top priorities, with an increase of between five and eight percentage points in every aspect evaluated. Furthermore, an increasing share of citizens thinks that the EU support for farmers is too low.

Relevance of the information policy

A comparison of DG AGRI's communication objectives with contents of Article 45 and the communication 'The CAP towards 2020' yields a positive result, indicating the relevance of DG AGRI's objectives. Stakeholder consultations also yielded positive assessments in relation to DG AGRI communication meeting the needs of the target audiences. It can therefore be concluded that the information measures employed by DG AGRI meet the needs of their target audiences to a great extent.

Eurobarometer results reveal that European citizens are aware of the relevance of agriculture and rural areas to the future of the European Union. They also indicate that citizens care a great deal about the provision of safe, healthy food of high quality – a topic about which DG AGRI often communicates. The survey of the Ag-Press network, however, revealed a lack of coverage of the CAP and related topics in national, regional and local media, as well as a potential explanation for this: only a third of respondents agreed that it is relatively easy to explain issues relating to the CAP and related topics to the general public. This result indicates that the European Commission should continue to review possibilities to support national, regional, and local actors in understanding and communicating about the CAP.

Coherence of the information policy

The CAP and the European Commission's corporate communication were fully complementary during the evaluation period, with no notable contradictions identified. This was the result of particularly strong and professional collaboration on the campaigns between DG AGRI and DG COMM.

Compared with DG AGRI's sizeable financial contribution to the Commission's corporate communication budget, topics relating to the CAP were reflected in corporate communication campaigns only to a moderate extent. This was the result of a bottom-up approach in selecting topics for corporate communication. InvestEU and Rural campaign (which was a pilot campaign, and was cut short by COVID-19) were the campaigns that featured the most prominent contributions from DG AGRI. CAP-related topics were, however, noticeable in corporate communication campaigns by the relevant stakeholders, and these campaigns were sometimes used as the main source of information on the CAP. The role of DG AGRI in supporting corporate communication is likely to significantly increase with the new campaign on the European Green Deal. Given the cross-cutting nature of the communication challenges involved – concerning, for example, sustainability, biodiversity, innovation and climate etc. – reinforced cooperation is necessary between the services of the Commission to develop relevant communication messages.

Desk research and interviews revealed that the information policy on the CAP is coherent with information policies on EU regional, health and environmental policies. While only limited data were available about the information policy on the EU trade policy, we were able to identify some level of coherence and an absence of conflicting messages.

Communication by the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) and EU market observatories complements the information policy on the CAP, as revealed by desk research and interviews. Moreover, synergies exist between the communication via the ENRD, EIP-AGRI and the activities of DG AGRI Unit B1.

Synergies have been also identified between communication about the CAP at national level and the information policy in terms of messages covered, target audiences reached and direct cooperation efforts. DG AGRI cooperated successfully with public authorities in the Member States in communicating about the CAP, notably through shared events, the engagement of multipliers and more structured activities (e.g. outreach exercises) to communicate the CAP to national audiences. The main messages and target audiences outlined in the DG AGRI external communication strategy are reflected in national communication, indicating a certain coherence; however, some of them are insufficiently well addressed. Communication campaigns directed towards average citizens and focusing on the CAP in relation to its contribution to health, food and the environment are scarce in comparison to information presenting the policy and farming components of the CAP. As a result, interviewees in the case studies identified stakeholders as the main target audience for national communication. Further efforts to develop positive information campaigns specifically tailored to the general public and its sub-groups are therefore the next steps to strengthen awareness of the CAP, dispel common prejudices, and ultimately ensure better complementarity with DG AGRI's objectives. The main levers used by DG AGRI to pursue the highest level of coherence between its messages and those implemented at national level are as follows:

- Networking activities, which have already proved important in ensuring shared communication on the CAP during the evaluation period, and which have enabled national actors – potential multipliers – to be informed directly about the messages promoted by DG AGRI.
- Grant projects, complementing national information efforts on the CAP and offering opportunities for collaboration between grant beneficiaries and other national actors. However, deeper forms of cooperation, understood in terms of joint actions, were rarely reported.
- Under the new CAP, Member States will have an obligation to communicate about their CAP Strategic Plans, providing an opportunity to further exploit synergies in communicating the CAP at European and national levels.

EU added value

Throughout the evaluation, we identified significant volume, scope, role and process effects of the information policy on the CAP in terms of EU added value, when compared with other communicating actors (primarily, the national public authorities). The information policy on the CAP has increased the volume of available information by substantially increasing the total reach of CAP-related messages in comparison with what could have been achieved using only the channels of public authorities in the Member States. Through activities implemented via the information policy on the CAP, a significant number of Europeans (5.9 million on the website, and even more on social media) were reached and informed about the CAP and related issues in the period 2016-2020. National communication actions by public authorities communicate in a less systematic way to the general public than to stakeholders. Therefore, campaigns targeted at citizens and implemented at a national level with the help of the information policy on the CAP (grant scheme) are especially important. The information policy on the CAP has been successful in broadening the scope of communication directed at various stakeholder groups. This effect was particularly strong with respect to various European and national CAP-related associations, networks and NGOs that were reached via conferences, the website, and on social media. In addition, DG AGRI has managed to attract a broad audience to its social media accounts. The aforementioned audiences would not have been reached to such an extent by the Commission's corporate communication or by communication from public authorities in the Member States. By being the primary, reliable source of information on the CAP (more than 92% of visitors said that they trust is the information on the DG AGRI website), the information policy also ensured that information is always available on the topics of food, farming and rural development, and that these topics are communicated accurately among citizens and

stakeholders. The information policy on the CAP had various process effects, each of which provided added value to the publicly available information on the CAP. Among such examples is the Ag-Press network, which provides a unique process for working with media professionals, among whom it is positively perceived. Similarly, the activity of communicating the CAP through grants ran smoothly, with the majority of grant recipients agreeing that all of the grant scheme's procedures ran efficiently, and that they were satisfied with the evaluation process.

RECOMMENDATIONS

General recommendations for the policy

For the overall information policy on the CAP, we recommend:

Focusing on reaching citizens at national, regional and local levels. In the context of the Sibiu meeting and the CAP reform, this increased focus could involve national actors, including national public authorities.

Further strengthening the focus on communication through multipliers: intermediary organisations such as national, regional and local agricultural associations; small and medium-sized businesses based in rural areas; or national, regional and local news media.

Keeping under review the possibilities to support multipliers in better understanding the CAP, to improve their capacity to communicate the policy clearly and effectively.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we recommend testing various new technologies and formats to better reach target audiences online. If they prove successful, these innovative formats could be continued after the pandemic. Examples include:

- Maximising the use of video
- Interactivity (quizzes, calculators, interactive videos, games etc.)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we recommend testing various new content-related approaches. If proved successful, these innovative trends could be continued after the pandemic. Examples include:

- Maximising the use of personalised content (according to the context of user)
- Simplification of content (personal stories, simple language)
- User-generated content
- Influencer marketing

As pandemic-related restrictions are relaxed in the future, we recommend increasing the amount and variety of physical activities in the Member States. Activities could be increased by:

- Capitalising on participation at fairs in various Member States
- Strengthening the focus on communication activities in those Member States that hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU

Reacting to discussions on both positive and potentially negative aspects of the CAP by providing factual and objective evidence.

Preparing a communication strategy that would better integrate different EU policies/strategies, and would focus still further on working together with other DGs to communicate these policies.

Preparing a communication strategy that would take into account the increased role of the Member States in communicating the CAP and focus on creating synergies with the governments of the Member States.

Activity-specific recommendations

For media networking, we recommend:

Facilitating the offering to Ag-Press members of “exclusive content” to increase the effectiveness of the platform and encourage journalists to write about CAP-related topics.

Offering more in-depth seminars on CAP-related topics and ensuring the presence of high-level speakers.

While COVID-19 restrictions remain in place, DG AGRI could continue to focus on online seminars for Ag-Press members.

Once pandemic-related restrictions have been relaxed, we recommend organising no more than two press trips a year, preferably to the countries holding the Council Presidency. In addition, we recommend holding 2-3 seminars.

For social media, we recommend:

Keeping under review the existing internal procedures used by the DG AGRI social media team to react swiftly to the dissemination of misinformation about the CAP.

Aligning the names of the different DG AGRI social media accounts.

Providing links from the DG AGRI website to its social media accounts (in the form of buttons indicating ‘Follow us on Facebook / Twitter’ or similar), and from one social media account to others (e.g. the description section of the Facebook account should contain a link to the corresponding Twitter account and vice versa).

For the website, we recommend:

Continuous user research to improve the information architecture.

Prioritising the translation of all the pages in the class ‘Food, Farming, Fisheries’ into all official EU languages.

Pushing for the Commission-wide improvement of the internal search engine.

Strengthening the website in terms of external search engine optimisation.

For events, we recommend:

Choosing and consistently following the same methodology for estimating and reporting the number of visitors to DG AGRI stands at fairs.

Keeping under review the preparatory activities provided for DG AGRI officials before they go to agri-food fairs.

For the grant scheme, we recommend:

Defining the KPIs that grant recipients should follow when implementing activities.

Emphasising the need for consistent impact indicators to be submitted in the final report.

Putting more efforts into promoting the grant scheme, particularly in countries where none or few

grants were implemented.

Promoting more cross-national projects by simplifying the application requirements so that affiliated entities from countries other than that of the beneficiary can join the project, while ensuring that messaging remains consistent with the objectives of the information policy on CAP and the profiles of local audiences.

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