France: the case of SUD THD

The development of electronic solutions for many aspects of daily life – from accessing public services through online portals to entertainment on digital platforms – has turned the deployment of optical fibre throughout national territories into a crucial matter. If anything, the lockdowns and the related surge in telework have stressed the need for high quality connection to the Internet everywhere, including in remote areas. In this context, fibre has become one of the major concerns of citizens in the Région Sud (the “Provence-Alpes-Côte d’Azur” region) when addressing local government representatives (WP9_FR_itw1). However, the geographical and demographical characteristics of the Région Sud make the deployment of optical fibre difficult (and economically not profitable) in some remote, mountainous or lightly populated areas. To address this situation and respond to citizens’ needs, local authorities set-up a collaborative arrangement, the “Syndicat Mixte Ouvert Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur Très Haut Débit” (in short SUD THD). SUD THD aims at coordinating local authorities’ investments in electronic and communication infrastructures and acting as the single contact point for private actors operating in this area.

This report provides information on SUD THD (“the collaboration” itself) and on a related ICT project, the “Guichet SUD THD” (the French word for “one-stop shop”, “counter” or “desk”, hereafter throughout the text “SUD THD e-counter”). This SUD THD e-counter is an online portal (website) aiming at connecting all partners – whether public or private – involved in “Fibre To The Home” installation works. It eases the centralization of each administrative procedures necessary for obtaining road and traffic authorizations (from different local authorities) to carry out the deployment of optical fibre. It also includes a library of useful contacts to organize operations of installation work on private land in the area. The beta version of this e-counter (called at the time “Guichet FTTH”) was awarded the “innovative territory” label in 2018 by “Les Interconnectés” (the interconnected), an association for the dissemination of digital best practices among French local governments. This initiative is thus to be
considered as a best practice. However, when SUD THD has tried to expand the usage of this e-counter (previously developed by an intercommunal authority gathering five municipalities and implemented on a limited area) to a larger territory, the initiative has faced hurdles and experienced failures.

**Description of the collaboration**

In the early 2010s, the French government launched a “digital plan” in order to ensure that all citizens can access a good quality connection to the Internet (WP9_FR_itw1). The plan notably included a call to private operators which invited them to express their interest in deploying the fibre in areas of their choice (WP9_FR_doc5). These zones, called AMII areas (“Appel à manifestations d’intentions d’investissement”, call for expressions of investment intentions), mainly concerned urban and suburban areas where the deployment of the fibre was directly economically beneficial for private operators. That is why local authorities did not subsidize the installation of communications infrastructure in these zones. In parallel, they focused their efforts on areas that are not as economically profitable for private operators (becoming “public initiative zones”), typically areas which are lightly populated, remote or geographically atypical, and launched a series of different initiatives across the country (WP9_FR_itw2).

SUD THD was established in this context, in October 2012, in the Région Sud. SUD THD unites local authorities in a syndicate (“syndicat mixte ouvert”), and included the Région Sud and two départements (Alpes de Haute-Provence and Hautes-Alpes, counting respectively 164,000 and 141,000 inhabitants), which are sub-regional authorities. In 2016, two other départements joined (Bouches-du-Rhône and Var, counting respectively 2,024,000 and 1,059,000 inhabitants). SUD THD aims to manage projects of optical fibre installation in the four concerned départements (covering a total population of 3,388,000 inhabitants, see the appendix for more information) in areas where private operators did not install these infrastructures themselves (WP9_FR_itw2). Importantly, as a public entity, SUD THD is not allowed to sell Internet connections to households and companies, but has to act as a wholesaler delegating B2C relations to private companies (WP9_FR_itw2). SUD THD realm for action is restricted to installation works and the management of communication infrastructures (WP9_FR_doc2).

SUD THD is managed by a committee, a board and a president (WP9_FR_doc1). The committee is composed of delegates representing each member institution, namely the Région
Sud (4 delegates having 24 votes in total) and the départements (each having 3 delegates with six votes). The committee meets at least once every six months and deliberates on all the issues managed by SUD THD including the budget. Since 2016, SUD THD has also organized in three territorial committees, one for the Alpes de Haute-Provence and Hautes-Alpes, one for the Bouches du Rhône and the last for the Var (WP9_FR_doc1, WP9_FR_doc2). These territorial committees decide on local-level matters in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity (WP9_FR_doc2). SUD THD board is composed of eight members, including the president (usually from the Region), five vice-presidents (from the départements) and two other members (from the Region), all elected among committee members. The president acts as the executive body and is in charge of preparing and implementing the committee’s decisions with the support of the SUD THD administrative services. The leadership is mainly in the hands of the Region as it enjoys a greater representation among the committee and the board.

By joining SUD THD, its member institutions delegate to the syndicate their competences related to the establishment, operation and commercialization of electronic communications infrastructures (WP9_FR_doc1). In practice, delegation has given rise to tensions when collective decisions are to be implemented in very distinct territories (WP9_FR_itw2).

**Impact of ICT on collaboration**

This section is dedicated to the presentation of SUD THD e-counter which was previously called FTTH e-counter. Interviewees did not mention that other ICT solutions have impacted their collaboration, with the exception of the online conferencing platforms used to communicate among partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

SUD THD e-counter is an online portal ([https://guichet.sud-thd.net/](https://guichet.sud-thd.net/)) aiming at connecting private operators and public partners with local authorities in order to facilitate the administrative processes related to the optical fibre installation works. The collaborative process works as follows (WP9_FR_itw1, WP9_FR_doc3). It starts with a private operator or a public institution’s subcontractor, which is in charge of the optical fibre installation works, wanting to deploy the fibre in a given area. The operator connects to the portal and fills in a form to request the road and traffic authorizations that are necessary to carry out building works. The operator may select on a map the area on which it wants to deploy the fibre (see figure 1, WP9_FR_doc3).
The syndicate gets the notification by e-mail and informs the competent authorities, whether a municipality, an intercommunality or the *département*, depending on which subnational government is in charge of the streets or roads concerned. Upon receipt of a notifying e-mail, the competent authority examines the request and delivers the road and traffic authorizations where appropriate. The process is only partially dematerialized as documents are still required to be scanned at some stages.

The online portal facilitates the circulation of information among the different local authorities. Also, it makes easier for all local authorities to trace back which operators were in charge of carrying out works (WP9_FR_itw2). As the deployment of optical fibre often involves subcontracting between different companies, SUD THD e-counter makes it easier for local authorities to examine citizens’ complaints – mostly related to roads being left in a poor condition after roadworks (WP9_FR_itw1). In such instances, local authorities update the telecommunication companies so that they avoid sub-contracting with these companies (WP9_FR_itw1).

For the telecommunication companies and their sub-contractors, SUD THD e-counter provides a “one-stop shop” to introduce requests concerning a given area, regardless of which local authority is in charge (municipality, intercommunality or *département*). Moreover, the e-counter provides information about the status of each request (see figure 2, WP9_FR_doc3).
Four status can be displayed: ‘awaiting validation’ (the request has not yet been examined), ‘process initiated’ (the request was validated by the syndicate and was sent to the competent authority), ‘authorized’ (the request is granted and the operator can consult and print the related road and or traffic authorization), ‘denied’ (the request is denied and the operator can consult the details of the refusal notification).

Figure 2. Screenshot of the FFTH e-counter, request of authorization

Overall, the main benefit of SUD THD e-counter is to allow all partners to manage the administrative procedures related to fibre deployment in just a few clicks. The e-counter has resulted in a slight acceleration of operations compared to traditional offline requests. According to users, a request takes on average 2 to 3 weeks before full authorization is granted or denied via SUD THD e-counter, against 3 to 4 weeks for a traditional process. Requests are sometimes processed in only a few hours or days (WP9_FR_itw2).

Efficiency of the collaboration

This section is divided in two parts. The first part presents the results of SUD THD as an organization joining several local authorities with the goal of efficiently delivering Fibre To The Home and Fibre To The Office in the Région Sud. The second part focuses on SUD THD e-counter and its efficiency. We discuss the successful development of a collaborative ICT tool by an intercommunal authority and its implementation on the territory of the Var département (which was a success); and the failed later attempts (at least up until now) to broaden the usage of the e-counter beyond Var.
SUD THD and the deployment of optical fibre in Région Sud

The objective of the local authorities when they decided to join and form SUD THD syndicate was fourfold: managing electronic communications infrastructures; easing applications for European and national funding; pooling technical, legal and economic skills across different local authorities; and sharing technical and financial risks related to the management of optical fibre deployment in public initiative zones (WP9_FR_itw2). In terms of efficiency, the main goal was to achieve economies of scale and lessen the risks related to important investments borne by relatively small public institutions. Even if the objectives of the collaboration were clearly put, assessing its efficiency is not straightforward. In fact, the collaboration was set as a response to a transfer of policy responsibilities: joining SUD THD was part of the strategy of local authorities to implement their new competences related to the establishment, operation and commercialization of electronic communications infrastructures. Therefore, there is no “previous situation” against which to assess the efficiency of the collaboration. However, several conclusions can be drawn from the SUD THD case.

A crucial benefit of SUD THD is that it distributes the investment and operating costs of digital development projects among the different members of the syndicate (WP9_FR_doc2). Without the collaboration, the implementation of important projects such as the deployment of the fibre may have been too risky financially to be managed by small local authorities alone. However, the pooling of financial resources also generated accounting difficulties as the French law does not allow to use “analytical accounting”, or managerial accounting (WP9_FR_doc2). This type of accounting – which brings each “product” closer to its costs and divides the results by projects and decision centres – would have allowed decision-makers to have a clearer overview of the different operations conducted within SUD THD, and notably about the projects developed by the different départements, that are currently counted in one category (WP9_FR_doc2).
Moreover, the idea of creating SUD THD by associating different local authorities was to meet funding requirements necessary to obtain more subsidies and to allow for a greater public co-financing of activities (WP9_FR_doc2). The Digital Society Fund (FSN “Fonds pour la Société Numérique”) was one of the targets. This fund of € 4.5 billion was created by the French State and is managed by the Deposits and Consignments Fund (“Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations”) in order to help the installation of high-speed communication infrastructures. SUD THD succeeded in attracting these national funding but also European ones. In 2016, SUD THD received a € 1,523,275 funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and € 3,555,000 from the FSN (WP9_FR_doc2).

**SUD THD e-counter: from a local success to a regional failure?**

Following the “digital plan” launched by the French government and the subsequent Departemental Digital Development Master Plan (SDAN “Schéma Directeur d’Aménagement Numérique”), the Var département established an agreement with private operators (the telecommunication companies Orange and SFR) interested in investing in AMII zones. The agreement outlined the objectives and obligations of the parties. The private operators committed to deploy optical fibre in due time and the local authorities committed to bring all the information necessary to undertake the installation works and facilitate the administrative process to get road and traffic authorizations. In this context, the administrative services of an intercommunality of the Var département reflected on a solution to facilitate the administrative process related to the deployment of the fibre on its territory. This intercommunality, currently called CAVEM (for “Communauté d’Agglomération Var Estérel Méditerranée”) after a reorganization in 2013, brings together 5 municipalities and counts more than 110,000 inhabitants.

The ICT department of the CAVEM was looking for a solution that included two elements: a database accessible for operators including the contacts details necessary to organize operations of installation work on private lands in the area, and an administrative chain ensuring the smooth delivery of road and traffic authorizations. The idea was also to get a tool that provides information about the fibre deployment on the territory in real-time (WP9_FR_itw1). The ICT department developed this tool “in-house” (described above in the section “Impact of ICT on collaboration”). The solution development costs, which were very low, were kept under control as there were managed internally (WP9_FR_itw1).
The e-counter brought different benefits. The SUD THD e-counter allowed the exchange of information and the follow-up of the entire process between different local authorities (municipalities, the intercommunality and the département) and between different department within each local authority (the urban planning department, the public works directorate and the digital department). The platform helped to solve problems the authorities were facing in other areas implying works on the public space such as sanitation and water management (WP9_FR_itw1). The platform has ensured a better follow-up of the actual works carried out on the ground and allowed to trace back and monitor (notably with maps and up-to-date plans) the operations of private companies and their sub-contractors (WP9_FR_itw1, WP9_FR_itw2).

For instance, it has been instrumental to a more efficient planning of road restoration works to not restore roads that will then be opened to install the fibre (WP9_FR_itw2). Finally, the e-counter has also facilitated the planning of fibre deployment by providing to private operators and public authorities a bird-eye view of the situation (WP9_FR_itw1).

The development of the ICT solution has also been supported by information sessions organized for the administrative staff in the different local authorities. Some staff members were reluctant to use “yet another application”. CAVEM’s ICT department organized meetings in the different municipalities and informed staff members of the benefits and objectives of the tool in order to convince them to use it (WP9_FR_itw1).

From this experience in the Var département (for AMII zones), the CAVEM decided to expand the use of the e-counter to the “public initiative zones” (where private operators did not invest voluntarily) and potentially to other départements of the Région Sud. After many discussions regarding which local authorities would be best to further develop the e-counter, the decision was made that SUD THD would take the lead (WP9_FR_itw1). But the transfer of responsibilities from CAVEM to SUD THD and the development of a second version of the e-counter resulted in a series of setbacks (WP9_FR_itw1, WP9_FR_itw2). SUD THD decided to keep the idea behind the solution but to develop it on a new (private) platform (V2). The output was technical deficiencies that resulted in the e-counter being inefficient. Among the deficiencies that were reported during interviews, one is striking: when operator submit an authorization request, local authorities do not receive a notification. This situation leads to long delays with requests “awaiting decision” or under the status “process initiated” for weeks. The different operators decided to turn to the previous offline procedure that is usually longer but has become safer in comparison (WP9_FR_itw1). Another issue was related to the
“governance” of the tool. The different users, whether they are operators or public authorities, were not associated to the development of this new version. This, in turn, appeared to have resulted in a lesser support to the project (WP9_FR_itw1). All these shortcomings led to the abandonment of the V2 and of the idea to expand the use of the SUD THD e-counter beyond the Var département. In order to fix the deficiencies mentioned above, a V3 is currently under development and should be released in the coming months (WP9_FR_itw1, WP9_FR_itw2). This third version also should allow to dematerialize each step of the administrative procedure without using paper documents anymore (see next section).

**Red tape**

When addressing the issue of red tape during the interview, a top manager of the administrative services of SUD THD answers straightforwardly: SUD THD is not tackling this issue seriously and this constitutes a problem (WP9_FR_itw2). While he acknowledges that the different versions of the SUD THD e-counter have attempted to reduce red tape (see hereafter), he also stressed that these attempts have faced major obstacles. The first of them is the alleged, and legendary, reluctance to change expressed by “the French” in general and their bureaucrats and politicians altogether. More interestingly, he suggests a second obstacle, in the form of the dematerialization of administrative procedures: through the impacts the various measures had in terms of public employment and the subsequent reduction of the number of civil servants. Third, according to the top manager interviewed, there is also a particular “culture” hampering collaboration in the Région Sud and which prevents local authorities to draw lessons from each other and adopt similar policies even when they proved successful or efficient. Finally, by contrast with the private sector (and the central state level1), local authorities either do not use Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) software, or do it in divergent ways. They have their own strategy, if they have one at all, in implementing management software or information systems with open-source solutions or tools developed by private suppliers (WP9_FR_itw2). The coexistence of different information structures results in the impossibility to standardize procedures across local authorities, or at least the many issues to do so (WP9_FR_itw2). Yet, standardization is a crucial element to ensure collaboration and smooth circulation of information between local authorities in order to reduce red tape. Tackling this last issue is precisely the aim of SUD THD e-counter.

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1 The French state has implemented the Chorus project which provides a single financial information system (FIS, based on SAP ERP) for all the central state administrations. More information about Chorus are available in the TROPICO Deliverable 4.3.
Without being an information system as such, SUD THD e-counter provides an administrative tool that is consistent for all local authorities that decide to use it (WP9_FR_itw2). The e-counter participate in the reduction of red tape by guaranteeing the integrity of the information circulating through the online tool. Moreover, through the process described above (see the section “Impact of ICT on collaboration”), the e-counter standardizes administrative procedures and thus contributes to mitigating the administrative burden borne by private operators. When addressing demands to any local authority using the SUD THD e-counter, private operators do not have to learn, use and adapt to different administrative process to obtain road and traffic authorizations required to carry out the deployment of optical fibre on different territories. In areas not covered by the SUD THD e-counter, by contrast, the situations are extremely different in terms of red tape. In some very small municipalities, mayor grant authorizations with a text message, while in larger municipalities, the administrative services follow (sometimes long) procedures to deliver authorizations. Finally, the next version of the SUD THD e-counter should allow to further dematerialize the administrative procedures in local authorities using it. Indeed, the current and previous versions used in the Var département required to scan documents. Physical documents issued by the administration are then converted in PDF documents. The next version should replace these scans by fully digital forms and documents. In conclusion, the SUD THD e-counter could be described as a solution that increases the quality and efficiency of the services delivered through the reduction of red tape related to optical fibre deployment. This reduction of red tape results from the standardization, speeding-up and digitalization of administrative procedures.
Appendix. Information about the départements member of SUD THD

The grey line represents the boundaries of the Région Sud. Four out of six départements of the Region are members of SUD THD. The following table provides information about these four départements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Département</th>
<th>Date of joining SUD THD</th>
<th>Population (2017)</th>
<th>Surface</th>
<th>Density</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hautes-Alpes</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>141,000</td>
<td>5,549 km²</td>
<td>25 per km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Alpes-de-Haute-Provence</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>164,000</td>
<td>6,925 km²</td>
<td>24 per km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Var</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>1,059,000</td>
<td>5,973 km²</td>
<td>177 per km²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bouches-du-Rhône</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2,024,000</td>
<td>5,087 km²</td>
<td>398 per km²</td>
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</tbody>
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