

INNOVATION – SHAPING THE FUTURE

Smart Villages: Supporting social and digital innovation in rural services

BACKGROUND

Many European rural areas seem to be locked into a 'circle of decline' by two mutually reinforcing trends– firstly, a shortage of jobs and sustainable business activity and secondly, inadequate and/or declining services.

DG AGRI, DG REGIO and DG MOVE of the European Commission jointly launched the '[EU Action for Smart Villages](#)'. The Action Plan takes a broad approach to rural innovation with digital technologies as a key enabling tool – but not the only solution. It also contemplates both economic (business) innovation and service innovation. Finally, the Action Plan outlines the need to go beyond individual isolated initiatives and, in line with the Cork 2.0 Declaration, recommends developing integrated approaches: "We need more than just building blocks. We need strategic approaches which will help policy makers, stakeholders and project promoters on the ground deliver results, taking into account the comparative strengths and weaknesses of their respective territories".



PRESENTATIONS

Italian national strategy for inner areas, Francesco Silvestri (Italy)

This integrated strategy supports 72 'pilot areas' in the implementation of projects aimed to the economic development as well as the improvement of local essential services in rural areas. The strategy is supported by the ESIF mostly for the economic development objectives, while the support to rural services (school, mobility, healthcare) is covered by National budgetary funds. It applies a multi-level governance where different institutional actors work closely with local stakeholders. It builds up in a local partnership where local mayors are the driving force of local strategies, with the support from a national task force of experts.



"The Local Action Groups play a leading role in the development and implementation of the local strategies." Francesco Silvestri.

Smart Countryside Strategy, Marianne Selkäinaho (Finland)

The Finnish study on Smart Countryside aimed at increasing knowledge on how to improve services in rural areas by using digitisation and other approaches (e.g. social innovation). The results of the study have helped to improve the targeting of the EAFRD (e.g. tailoring the support of RDP Measure 7 – Basic Services and LEADER) and have informed the development of new policy initiatives in Finland on digitalising rural areas (e.g. the national strategy for broadband or the New governmental decision on Rural Digitalization 2017).



"Cooperation between different public administrations is necessary to address the challenges in the provision of rural services. It is possible when there is will." Marianne Selkäinaho.

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MAIN OUTCOMES FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

Participants discussed two specific questions in small groups:

- What are the **current challenges and needs** for supporting innovation in rural services?
- How could the **various policies (including RDPs) better support innovation in rural service** provision?



Challenges

- The implementation of integrated strategies requires a **smooth horizontal and vertical coordination and collaboration**, which in many cases is not happening. Rural services are provided in a wide variety of sectors such health, education, mobility, energy, which in many places in the EU, are managed by different public administrations at different levels which work in a very independent manner. This compartmentalised way of working is also prevalent in the structural funds, among sectoral stakeholders, as well as between researchers and other rural actors.
- Key actors involved in rural development at the local level **lack relevant capacity, experience and in some cases the will to support emerging initiatives for smart villages**. The provision of services in areas such as health, education, mobility and energy are new fields for many local actors, hence, new ideas, tools and forms of support are required.

Policy recommendations

- **Enhance targeting and coordination through bottom-up strategic planning and rural proofing of all policies and funding streams.** This will enable a better identification of the local needs with respect to the provision of services in rural areas and the targeting of interventions under the different policies.
- **Support to pilot smart villages network across Europe.** There is a need to link-up and spread many of the excellent pilot initiatives taking place in many countries. Sharing evidence and experiences will encourage further initiatives around the EU.
- **Enabling LEADER and other local initiatives (digital hubs) to provide the full range of support required for emerging projects for the smart villages.** An enabling environment should be provided at the policy level to support local actors to support initiatives in all the relevant areas related to the provision of quality rural services.

RELEVANT ENRD RESOURCES & TOOLS

- ▶ Follow the latest **ENRD Thematic Working Group** on Smart Villages.
- ▶ Get informed through our **ENRD publications**.
- ▶ Explore practices and initiative in the ENRD **Projects database**.

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