

## DIGITIZING RURAL ECONOMIES

### Strategies & approaches for improving connectivity in rural areas

#### BACKGROUND

Broadband is of strategic importance for growth and innovation in all sectors of the economy. Improving access to broadband and ICT services, especially in remote, rural areas, can increase the quality of life by facilitating access to services and the economic possibilities for local businesses.



The focus of the workshop was to inform stakeholders and policy makers of the challenges rural communities are facing in acquiring high-speed broadband connectivity. Participants and contributors jointly sought to identify the key features and success factors from cases where rural communities had themselves taken the initiative. They discussed the lessons learnt and solutions that could assist other rural communities to put in place the infrastructure needed for enhanced connectivity (knowledge sharing). Based on the findings the participants worked together and suggested changes and adaptations of relevant policies and more specifically of the rural development programmes (RDPs). These changes, and in particular local initiatives such as CLLD, could potentially contribute to overcoming the challenges faced by local communities.

#### PRESENTATIONS

##### ASNET Mobile Broadband: A rural development project at Asnaes peninsular, Kalundborg, Denmark, Jes Jessen

With the support of LEADER, the ASNET project overcame the reluctance of traditional suppliers and established a wireless broadband 4G LTE network with antennas mounted on an 80 meters tall windmill. As of 2017 there is a reliable and stable connection at speeds reaching 130 (download)/130 (upload) Mbits/s and there is 95 % coverage of the Asneas peninsula with 240 subscribers. The beneficiaries of the established mobile broadband are citizens, farmers, schoolchildren, students and businesses at Asnaes peninsula.



##### Molenwaard Community Broadband, The Netherlands, Marieke Kok

In the municipality Molenwaard a group of citizens launched an initiative to create their own fast broadband network (owned by civil society). The main purpose of the project was to provide access to a fast glass optical fibre network to the whole local community (including those living at the outskirts), entrepreneurs and households in the municipality of Molenwaard.



##### B4RN Rural Broadband (video), UK

The impact of the Broadband for the Rural North Ltd or 'B4RN' to people's lives in North villages of the UK is huge. Young people are coming home to build their own businesses and farmers enjoy the advantages of the digitisation. Broadband for 'B4RN' was launched by a local volunteer group and is a hyperfast broadband project owned by a community company that provides true symmetric individual fibre connections to every property in the participating the local communities.

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## OTHER INNOVATION PROJECTS

**Guifi.Net Foundation** (Spain, Catalonia) adopted a model of investment that successfully managed to engage volunteers, Internet Services Providers, and public administrations together in new development prospects to the rural economy. It has been awarded as best project for the category on innovative models of financing, business and investment.

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD3HYeD4Lm4>

## MAIN OUTCOMES FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

Participants discussed two specific questions in small groups:

- What are the **current practical challenges and needs** to support connectivity in rural services?
- How could the **various policies (including RDPs) better support connectivity** in rural areas?



### Challenges

- There is a major tension between **needs** and **profitability**.
- There is **lack of capacity and understanding** of the potential for setting up and exploiting broadband connectivity at all levels.
- **Legal barriers** are very often responsible for the delay or the non-setting up of broadband infrastructure (e.g. land owners, environmental restrictions, etc.).

### Recommendations

- **Mobilise** and **use the full potential of Local Action Groups** to support the different steps required for "demand aggregation" and for the emergence of community broadband networks.
- National digital agendas/strategies/plans should **integrate all funds** as tools to achieve rural connectivity objectives.
- Use ESI Funds and financial instruments to leverage different types of financial support from private sector.
- Create **competence centres** (hubs) at national and regional levels for capacity building for broadband deployment.

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