



European Commission - Speech
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Smart Villages and digitalisation for resilient rural areas: speech by Commissioner Janusz Wojciechowski at the Joint Seminar on Community-led Local Development and Smart Villages, Lednice, Czechia

Prague, 27 October 2022

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests,

It is my great pleasure to speak to you today.

I am especially grateful to the **Committee of the Regions**, the Honourable Members of the **European Parliament**, and the **Czech presidency** of the Council, for organising this seminar.

I am sorry I cannot join you in person, but I am happy that several of my colleagues from the Commission are with you today.

I look forward to hearing their reports on the **outcomes of this important seminar**, on how we can:

- improve our actions in **community-led local development**,
- work more closely in our **Rural Pact**,
- and continue our progress in the **Long-term Vision for Rural Areas**.

I also welcome the declaration being put forward today. Working “Together for a smart, rural Europe” is an approach very much in line with the ambitions of our **Long-term Vision**.

It is almost three years now since we launched the idea of this Vision.

It seems like a long time ago; a time **before the pandemic**, and **before the war in Ukraine**.

Both of these crises have shown our rural areas in a **new light**.

We can see more clearly their importance for the **resilience** of our society – they provide food and raw materials, energy, and employment.

And we can see how important they are for the sustainability of our society – they are the base of our biodiversity, the source of our water, soils, and forests.

Our recent crises have also thrown a light on the challenges that our rural areas face:

- from **depopulation, transport exclusion, and declining services**,
- to **rising costs of living and adaptation to climate change**

In the face of these challenges, it is crucial that we continue to advance our Long-term Vision for Rural Areas – that we meet our goals for **stronger, more connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040**

My colleague, Commissioner Suica has already discussed some important parts of our Vision.

I would like to take a few moments to focus on two particular elements: **smart villages** and **digitalisation** – both of which can spark our Vision to life.

Smart villages and the CAP

To begin with, Smart Villages are a key policy tool to unlock the potential of our rural communities.

Since 2020, DG AGRI has been implementing two of the European Parliament's Preparatory Actions for Smart Villages: **Smart Rural 21** and **Smart Rural 27**.

The purpose of these projects has been to:

- clarify the concept of Smart Villages,
- to identify good examples and case studies,
- and to implement pilot Smart Village strategies across Europe, that can draw useful conclusions for future policy actions

These projects have been a success so far.

By working together, we have

- strengthened the capacities of local communities for **smart development**,
- and helped to identify new technological, digital, and social innovations, suited to the needs of **diverse rural areas**.

I am glad to say that, in the majority of **CAP Strategic Plans** submitted so far, the Smart Village concept is being supported.

It will be implemented via:

- **LEADER** local development strategies
- as well as **stand-alone investments** and **interventions**, in areas like infrastructure, basic services, and cooperation projects.

With this support from the Common Agricultural Policy, **combined with the cohesion policy** and **other EU funds**, I am confident that Smart Villages will soon be lighting up the countryside of Europe.

Digitalisation

But to apply **smart solutions**, we first need **smart systems** in place.

Here, **digitalisation** is key.

It is especially crucial when it comes to modernising our farming sector:

- By harnessing digital technologies, we can make agriculture **more sustainable** and **more resilient against crises**.
- We can make it easier for farmers to improve their performance and productivity, by **embracing new innovations** and **better uses of data**.

Given these possibilities, I am happy to inform you that **all Member States have submitted digitalisation plans** in their CAP Strategic Plans.

The **Digital Europe Programme** will also boost digitalisation in farming, by supporting the implementation of the Common Data Space on Agriculture.

However, digitalisation can only deliver strong benefits with strong **connectivity** – in terms of both speed and quality.

High-capacity broadband networks help to bring better information, education and health services to rural communities, thereby fighting outward migration.

For example, following the COVID pandemic, we can see how **more connected rural areas** attract new businesses and teleworkers.

Furthermore, modern **precision farming techniques** – which can benefit productivity, reduce costs, and protect the environment – require fast and reliable internet connections.

Unfortunately, rural areas continue to lag behind in this regard: for example, only 60% of homes in rural areas have access to fast broadband, compared to 86% of the urban population.

It is therefore crucial that Member States support broadband infrastructure.

Member States can use rural development funding, the **Connecting Europe Facility**, as well as the **Recovery and Resilience Facility**, to roll out high-capacity networks across their rural territories.

By putting these networks in place, we can pave the way for **future-proof farms** and **smart rural businesses**.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to conclude on this point, and allow you to return to your discussions.

I have outlined only two **action areas** for innovative rural development in the European Union. Over the course of the conference, I am sure you will discuss many more.

As I said at the beginning, both the **COVID pandemic** and the **war in Ukraine** have shown our rural areas in a new light.

In this light, we have sharpened the focus of our **Long-term Vision**.

Now, when we look at rural areas, we not only see their problems, but also their **potential**.

We see the **central role they can play in the future of Europe**:

- to protect our **environment** and develop **our economy**,
- to improve the **resilience** of our **energy system** and support the **security** of our **food system**.

Now, when we look at rural areas, we not only look at how they fall behind, but also at **how we can get behind them**.

We must get behind them with **all of our policies**, using interventions **for rural areas, and not just in rural areas**. **These areas are more than agriculture** and the **Common Agricultural Policy cannot do it alone**.

We need to get behind them with all levels of governance – across the institutions and bodies of the European Union; across the authorities and agencies of nations and regions.

With everyone behind them, I believe that rural communities can truly move forward, and become our **leading communities** in the 21st Century.

On this note, I thank you for your time, and I wish you a successful conference.

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