

Pre-Conference Highlights

Parallel Session: Smart rural communities - Revitalising public goods and services through digital and social innovation

Moderator: Paul Soto, ENRD Contact Point

BACKGROUND

This workshop considered the factors that enable innovation by 'smart rural communities' in different parts of the world and made suggestions on how to strengthen these approaches.

Although the term 'smart rural communities' is not used explicitly either in the OECD's [New Rural Policy 3.0](#) or in the [Cork 2.0 Declaration](#), both refer to a number of key ingredients. These include: strengthening bottom-up and locally led initiatives; taking a broader approach to well-being and quality of life; building on local assets and investing in both entrepreneurship and rural services; attracting young people; developing the potential offered by better connectivity, low-carbon and circular economies, and improved linkages with urban areas.

These principles have triggered a recent European initiative called '[EU Action for Smart Villages](#)'. Within this framework, the European Network for Rural Development Contact Point (ENRD CP) organised a Thematic Group of active EU stakeholders. The group identified many examples of rural people taking the initiative to mobilise assets and make the most of their specific opportunities through both social and digital solutions. Some are presented below and others can be found in the ENRD [Smart Villages Portal](#).



PANELIST PRESENTATIONS



[Triggering and sustaining community-led social innovation](#)
Amanda Bryan
Crown Estate Scotland (UK)

Scotland has tried to create an enabling environment for rural communities to own and manage land and other local assets. Social innovation in rural areas is often triggered by a crisis facing local people, but it can also be stimulated by supportive government action.

The Crown Estates Scotland are using some imaginative methods for working with rural communities. It is essential to offer early support, regular capacity building, invest in enabling infrastructure and accept the risk of failure.

«Community-led social innovation offers a smart way of coping with local rural challenges.»



[Increasing the benefits of rural-urban linkages](#)
Tom Jones
European Economic and Social Committee

Rural life styles and life cycles are evolving rapidly and are increasingly interconnected with cities. There is a need for more open and inclusive rural areas where older people are more in tune with young people's needs and where rural communities as a whole are more welcoming to newcomers.

Partnerships with cities can offer opportunities for rural areas and citizens, and vice versa. Social enterprises are a key tool for exploiting these synergies while returning the benefits to the community.

«Rural areas need to be open and inclusive to innovations, attitudes, culture and approaches coming from urban areas to make use of the potential of partnerships with them.»



Improving connectivity at local level

Jan Dröge
Broadband Competence
Offices (BCO) Network

Only 40% of rural households have next generation internet access, as opposed to 76% of total EU households. The BCO Network has an action plan to help EU Member States overcome this problem and achieve the targets for connectivity.

In rural areas with no broadband, it is important that rural actors take the initiative to come together, aggregate demand, develop skills and build the business case for investment. There are many examples in the EU where the mobilisation of local rural communities has enabled the creation of very good broadband infrastructure.

«Even in rural areas where broadband connectivity has been made available, the skill sets of the people are often not yet at the level to adequately exploit this opportunity. So it is important for rural communities to take the initiative.»



Ensuring rural communities harness the full potential of digital technologies

Steffen Hess
Fraunhofer IESE (Germany)

Digital innovations at the village level require an adequate 'digital ecosystem'. This includes the basic infrastructure for connectivity, a technical platform, digital applications in specific services, and, above all, the needs and skills of the community itself. It is necessary for rural communities to work in parallel on all of these levels rather than wait for a solution on just one.

The involvement of the rural community through a 'living lab' has been a success factor in the implementation of the **Digital Villages** project in Germany. It helped to identify residents' needs and develop sustainable solutions.

«Access to broadband is important, but its absence is not an excuse to not start working on the potential use that can be given to technological developments.»

MAIN OUTCOMES FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

At the level of rural communities

- There is a need for **brokers, enablers, champions, project leaders, and multipliers** to ensure that social and digital innovation emerges and grows in rural areas.
- **Capacity building and skills development** must prepare for future work and life in rural areas.
- **Address cultural and lifestyle issues** which link rural and urban areas, younger and older people, residents and newcomers. These are now more of a continuum than a divide.

At the policy level

- **Create an institutional and funding architecture which enables community-level solutions.** This needs to be flexible, empowering, stable and clear.
- **Focus investments on strategic enabling infrastructure** which can bring together the whole community. This means improved targeting and synergies rather than more money.

More information at <https://enrd.ec.europa.eu> & <http://www.oecd.org/rural/rural-development-conference/>