5th Thematic Group meeting

The fifth meeting of the Thematic Group (TG) brought together around 40 stakeholders from 16 different countries and a wide range of organisations to exchange ideas on how to design Smart Village Strategies which effectively empower rural communities in different national contexts.

The meeting concluded that becoming a Smart Village was something to aspire to rather than being a measure or a method. Digitisation was seen as a key tool, but not the only one. Participants argued that policies should be inclusive and flexible to deal with very different contexts and that care should be taken to avoid additional layers of strategies and structures.

Event Information

Date: 4 October 2018
Location: Brussels, Belgium
Participants: 40 participants (out of which 12 participated online) - including EU institutions, European organisations, Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, Local Action Groups (LAGs) and researchers.
Outcomes: Preliminary orientations on how to design Smart Village Strategies to effectively empower rural communities in different national contexts.
Website: 5th meeting TG on Smart Villages

State of play of Smart Villages in the EU

Stefan Ostergard (DG AGRI) described the growing political interest in Smart Villages across Europe. The main messages outlined from the discussions carried out so far in all forums are that:

i) Smart Villages are about **inspiring** communities to move forward and not just about a specific funding stream.

ii) **Digitisation** is one of the main tools, but Smart Villages are **not necessarily digital.** A broad range of actions can be supported.

iii) Support for Smart Villages should **be simple and build on existing structures,** strategies, governance, civil society initiatives and partnerships. It should not create a new administrative layer.

iv) Support should enable **strategic, citizen-based initiatives**.

v) There is a need for **flexibility**, for adapting the concept, the instruments and the selection criteria to different national/regional/ local contexts.

The work will continue with a focus on how Smart Villages can be supported with CAP plans and other policies and how to ensure these policies work together.

Eleftherios Stavropoulos (DG REGIO) outlined that the draft proposal for Cohesion Policy introduces a dedicated policy objective to foster a "Europe closer to citizens" by promoting the "sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas and local initiatives" (PO5). This new cross-cutting policy objective, together with streamlined territorial instruments such ITIs and CLLD, has major potential for creating a simpler and more flexible framework for supporting Smart Villages.

Paul Soto (ENRD CP) introduced the key messages from the scoping paper developed by the ENRD Contact Point. This illustrates the diversity of Ministries and Agencies that are taking the lead at national and regional levels as well as the range of actors leading implementation on the ground. The main policy driver is often digital but there is a wide range of initiatives to support a transition to a more sustainable "village of the future". The Thematic Group can connect these diverse initiatives into a learning platform. It can also produce examples and orientations for how to use different policy tools and ensure they work together more effectively.

Designing Smart Village Strategies

This section presents some initial ideas about the possible components of Smart Village Strategies based on the work carried out during the first year of the ENRD Thematic Group and discussions based on presentations from Finland, Austria, Italy, Scotland and Romania during the fifth meeting. This information does not represent any official view or opinion, it simply serves as a starting point for developing a document aimed at providing orientations to policy-makers on the key components of Smart Village Strategies.

Possible spatial scales for Smart Village Strategies

1. Higher level strategic frameworks for Smart Villages.

It could/should be established in CAP plans and/or ERDF OPs. Other funds (public or private) and policies could play a role. These might cover objectives, types of intervention, types of area, targets, instruments to be used, funds available, etc. Some countries may also have separate, freestanding plans. Such frameworks may operate at a national level, or within these overall frameworks, regions may develop specific schemes tailored to meet the challenges of their rural settlements.

2. Local Smart Village Strategies or plans could support cooperation through tailor made packages of interventions (animation, capacity building, technical studies, pilots, small scale investment, etc.) designed by communities at local level to address a specific challenge or seize an opportunity. They could take place at the level of village settlements, municipalities, groups of municipalities, islands and even involve cooperation with towns and cities. LEADER/CLLD will in some Member States be suited to deliver such plans, and other policies may also play a role depending on the context.

Possible scope of Smart Village Strategies

The higher level strategic frameworks should create the conditions for Smart Village Strategies/plans in a wide range of fields. The local Smart Village Strategies/plans could support a series of specific activities in one or more fields that mobilise the local community. The plans should help the community in the transition to a more sustainable future. They could cover:

Economic: Innovative actions supporting emerging value chains and local economic clusters (both agricultural and non-agricultural) based on local assets and areas of comparative advantage (bioeconomy, smart tourism destinations, etc.).

Social: Innovative actions to ensure sustainable mobility and good quality social and cultural services. These should also include investments in skills and capacities for the community. They could also improve linkages with towns and cities.

Environmental: Innovative actions to improve resource efficiency, create local energy communities, reduce the carbon footprint, promote a circular economy enhance biodiversity, both protect and valorise environmental assets.

Enabling conditions at local level

An active group of local citizens who drive the process. This could have a legal form, but it is not necessary. Civil society or public organisations may take the lead depending on circumstances – as long as the group is trusted by the community and is open and inclusive. External players and the private sector can also contribute as long as local people are at the centre. Leadership is important and it is vital to build local capacity and ensure that the most remote and deprived areas benefit and are not left behind.

A simple but sustainable Smart Village Plan for involving a series of stakeholders in a sequence of actions designed to reach a specific goal in the area. Actions could include soft investments like animation, advice, training, research, technical studies, etc., and small-scale investments. These should be based on a sustainable business model and form part of a vision (road map for the future of the area) – possibly contained in an existing municipal, LEADER or community strategy. It is important to avoid another layer of general strategies just to get funding.

ENRD resources and tools on Smart Villages

Various thematic outputs – including a short video (in 22 languages), editions of the EU Rural Review and EAFRD Projects Brochure, an online portal, briefings, case studies, and meeting highlights – clarify the concept and outline the wide range of initiatives that can form part of it. In addition, the ENRD Smart Villages community has been launched on Facebook, **so join us!**

https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/