



Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Bis

Final Report

(Smart Rural 27 Project)

Written by E40
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Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century – Bis

Final Report

(Smart Rural 27 Project)

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We would like to express particular thanks to the members of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory who have supported our work throughout the Smart Rural 27 project through sharing their challenges, experience, smart ideas and solutions, and for their active and enthusiastic participation in the Smart Rural 27 activities.

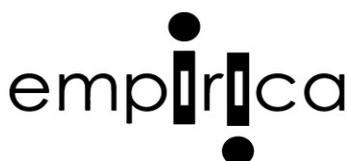
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The main author of this report is Edina Ocsko (Project Coordinator of the Smart Rural 27 Project), supported by other E40 Team members: Anita Balogh, Emese Ocsko and Katrina Idu, and national expert inputs.

The project was coordinated by:



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ABSTRACT

Smart Villages is a relatively new concept that was first formulated by the European Commission – at the initiation of the European Parliament - through the EU Action for Smart Villages in 2017. The 1st Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century (called Smart Rural 21 project, 2019-2024) aimed to promote the uptake of the Smart Villages concept through directly supporting rural communities across Europe in implementing smart village strategies and smart solutions.

The aim of the 2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century – Bis (called Smart Rural 27 project, 2020-2024) was to follow-up on the outcomes of the Smart Rural 21 project and help an effective policy support framework emerge at both the local and policymaking levels. The Smart Rural 27 project also set up the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory to engage stakeholders at all levels through exchange of experience and peer-to-peer learning, with the aim to improve the Smart Villages support framework. The Smart Rural 27 project implemented a range of support activities and analyses, including a smart villages geomapping tool (village/ rural community database), an inventory of Smart Villages resources, a series of events and related materials organised in the context of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, a series of creative products (podcasts, short documentaries, lighthouse factsheets) to promote inspiring Smart Villages approaches, the analysis of the CAP and other policies across all Member States (resulting in CAP factsheets in English and national languages for all the CAP Strategic Plans and a CAP Strategic Plans Synthesis Report), and reports on Covid-19 and the impact of Smart Villages on the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies.

RÉSUMÉ

Les 'Smart Villages' (villages intelligents) sont un concept relativement nouveau qui a été formulé pour la première fois par la Commission européenne en 2017, à l'initiative du Parlement européen, dans le cadre de l'action de l'UE en faveur des 'Smart Villages'. La première action préparatoire sur les zones rurales intelligentes au XXI^e siècle (appelée "projet Smart Rural 21", 2019-2024) visait à promouvoir l'adoption du concept de 'Smart Villages', en soutenant directement les communautés rurales européennes, dans la mise en œuvre de stratégies et de solutions intelligentes pour ces villages.

L'objectif de la deuxième action préparatoire sur les zones rurales intelligentes au XXI^e siècle (appelée "projet Smart Rural 27", 2020-2024) était de suivre les résultats du projet Smart Rural 21, ainsi que d'aider à 'faire émerger un cadre efficace pour la mise en place des 'Smart Villages, à l'échelle locale, ainsi qu' à différents niveaux d'élaboration des politiques publiques. Le projet Smart Rural 27 a également introduit l'Observatoire pilote européen des Smart Villages afin de permettre l'échange d'expériences entre pairs, d'améliorer le cadre de soutien aux 'Smart Villages', et ce à tous les niveaux d'élaboration politique. Le projet Smart Rural 27 a permis de mettre en œuvre une série d'activités de soutien et d'analyses: cela inclut notamment un outil de géocartographie des 'Smart Villages' (base de données des villages/communautés rurales); un inventaire des ressources relatives aux 'Smart Villages'; une série d'événements et de matériels organisés dans le cadre de l'Observatoire pilote européen des 'Smart Villages' ; une série de produits de communication (podcasts, courts documentaires, fiches d'information sur les actions phares) afin de promouvoir les approches inspirantes des Smart Villages; une analyse de la Politique Agricole Commune (PAC) et d'autres politiques des différents États membres (ce qui a donné lieu à l'élaboration de fiches d'information sur la PAC en anglais et dans les langues nationales pour tous les plans stratégiques de la PAC et à un rapport de synthèse sur les Plans Stratégiques de la PAC); et les rapports sur la pandémie de Covid-19 et de l'impact des 'Smart Villages' sur les stratégies européennes du Pacte vert européen , de la Ferme à la Table et de celle dédiée à la Biodiversité.

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I. INTRODUCTION TO THE SMART RURAL 27 PROJECT

I.1 The background of Smart Villages

Smart Villages is a relatively new concept that was launched by the European Commission – supported by the European Parliament - through the [EU Action for Smart Villages in 2017](#). In the same year, the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD) launched its Thematic Working Group on Smart Villages to facilitate exchange among stakeholders about the new concept. Between 2018 and 2019, the Pilot Project on Smart Eco-social Villages – supported by DG AGRI - was launched with the aim of providing a comprehensive definition for Smart Villages (see below) and identifying relevant good practices and case studies.

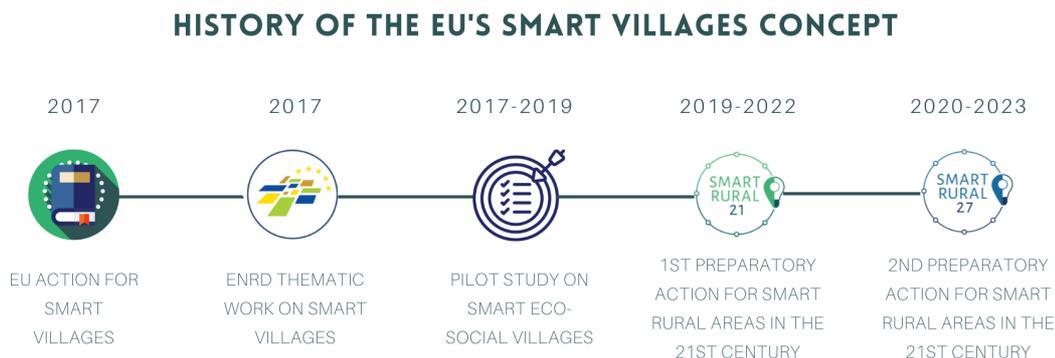
Smart Villages Definition provided by the Smart Eco-social Villages Study

Smart villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of smart village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources.

Source: Pilot project: European Commission/ Ecorys (2019). Smart Eco-Social Villages, Final Report

The 1st and 2nd Preparatory Actions on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century (called Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects respectively), supported by the European Commission (DG AGRI) and coordinated by E40, have aimed to operationalise the Smart Villages definition and promote the uptake of the Smart Villages concept across the EU at both local (rural community) and policymaking levels.

Figure 1: Steps in the EU's Smart Villages concept support



Source: E40 (2022). [Guidebook on How to become a Smart Village](#), SR21 project

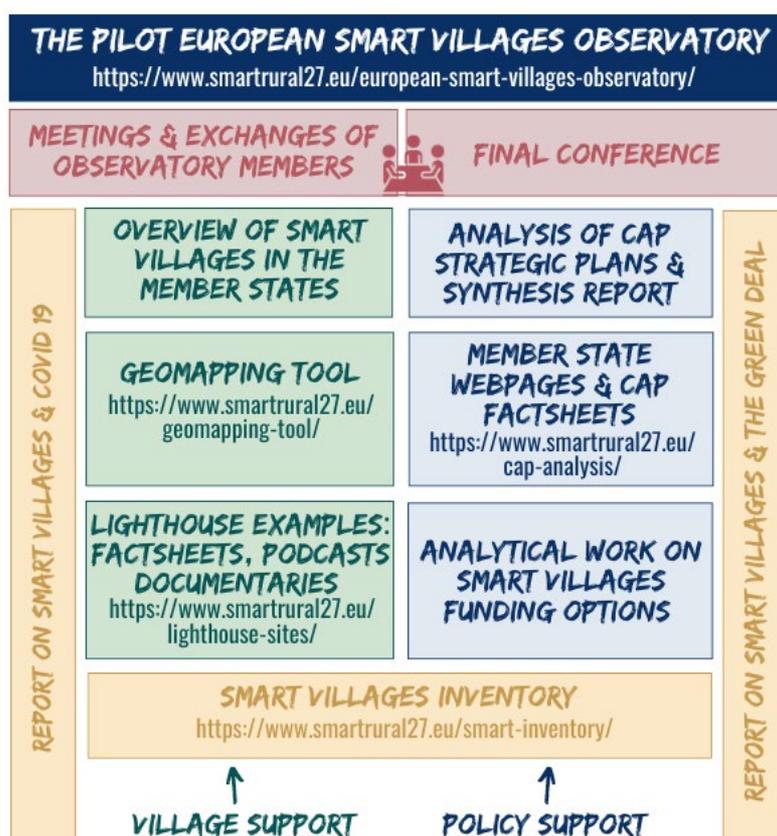
I.2 The Smart Rural 27 project

The main goal of the 2nd Preparatory Action (Smart Rural 27 project) **was to prepare Member States and rural communities for the implementation of Smart Villages within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) post-2020**, as well as other EU policies and initiatives, which could potentially support the emergence of additional Smart Villages across the European Union.

In line with the overall objective of the project, **four specific objectives** have been set:

1. Provide knowledge, knowhow on Smart Villages;
2. Inform and improve the development of CAP Strategic Plan (and other policy) implementation;
3. Facilitate the implementation of Smart Village Strategies;
4. Set-up & promote lighthouse examples for effective programming.

In order to achieve the above objectives, **the project developed a series of tasks** and activities concerning both (1) village support, i.e. support for the 'on-the-ground' implementation of Smart Villages and (2) policy support, i.e. support for developing Smart Villages policies, indicated respectively with green and blue coloured boxes in Figure 2 below. Furthermore, cross-cutting activities (yellow boxes in the figure) have also been defined, and the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory was set up as an overarching support framework for the project.

Figure 2 : Smart Rural 27 tasks

Source: E40

The key tasks and activities - defined in the Technical Specifications (TS) - concerning these two dimensions have been grouped according to **core work packages**. The methodology and most relevant final outputs are highlighted in the table below (a detailed elaboration of tasks and all outputs are presented in this report).

Table 1: List of main outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 project

Task	Contributes to	Outcomes
Mapping of progress regarding Smart Village initiatives in the EU (Task 1.1)	Objective 1 Objective 2	Inventory of existing information: https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-inventory/
		Short report on the Overview of Smart Villages in Member States
Smart villages as reply to Covid-19 crisis (Task 1.2)	Objective 1	Report on Smart Villages & Covid-19
Identify the different type of support to Smart Villages made available in the EU Member States (Task 1.3)	Objective 1	Report on 'Funding options to support Smart Villages in Member States'

Task	Contributes to	Outcomes
Provide know-how and a framework methodology for developing support schemes for Smart Villages in national CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.1)	Objective 1	Country pages and pdf factsheets for each Member State: https://www.smartrural27.eu/cap-analysis/
Raise awareness about available financial assistance for Smart Villages in Member States (Task 2.2)	Objective 1 Objective 2	Blueprint Report on Smart Villages
Set-up a group of lighthouse examples (Task 2.3)	Objective 1 Objective 4	Promotional products (https://www.smartrural27.eu/lighthouse-communities/): - Visual lighthouse examples fiches included in a database: - Story-telling products: Short documentaries and podcasts
Monitor and analyse the support for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.4)	Objective 1 Objective 2	27 Member State CAP Strategic Plan structured factsheets: https://www.smartrural27.eu/cap-analysis/
Preparing grounds for setting-up an EU Smart Villages Observatory (Task 3.1)	Objective 1 Objective 3	European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, including meetings and other outputs at all levels: https://www.smartrural27.eu/european-smart-villages-observatory/
Providing a strategy and content for outreach and communication purposes (Task 3.2)	All objectives	Outreach strategy
Monitor and assess Smart Villages' contributions to the EU Green Deal (Task 4)	Objective 1 Objective 2	Report on Smart Villages and the EU's Green Deal
Leaflet & Executive Summary (Task 5)	Objective 1	Leaflet & Executive Summary
Final Conference (Task 5)	Objective 1 Objective 3	Final conference
Final Report (Task 5)	Objective 1 Objective 2	Final report on the outcomes of the 2 nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas

Source: E40

I.3 The organisation of the Smart Rural 27 work

The Smart Rural 27 project was carried out through the work of an expert group as follows:

1. **The Core Team (E40 – Hungary, Project Coordinator)** was responsible for the overall coordination of the work with support of the national experts, specialist experts, and various stakeholders (especially members of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, including representatives of rural communities). The Core Team also took responsibility for the development of most of the main outputs (including the website contents, analytical and progress reports).



2. **Partners of the consortium** (Agricultural University of Athens, AUA – Greece, empirica - Germany, Ecolise – Belgium and Highclere Consulting - Romania) have contributed to the implementation of specific tasks, supporting the E40 team, including the technical development and management of the website and national expert role in Greece by AUA, support for the work on digital services by empirica (including specialist study, support for the Knowledge Cluster on Digital Services and technical support for rural communities), development of the Report on the European Green Deal, Farm-to-Fork and Biodiversity Strategies by Ecolise, and national expert tasks in Romania (HCC).
3. **National experts** (coordinated and contracted by E40) were responsible for carrying out a series of tasks, including Smart Villages country-analysis and development of the contents of the website's country pages and collecting village profile information for the geomapping tool, developing the CAP Strategic Plan Factsheets in English and national languages, coordination of taskforce work (where applicable), support for various events and meetings, support for the development of lighthouse examples (where applicable) and communication about the main outcomes of the project.
4. **Members of the European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory** have largely contributed to the implementation of the project through their active participation and contribution to the various activities of the Observatory.

The work (tasks specified by the TS) has been structured according to Work Packages as follows:

1. **WORK PACKAGE 1: MAPPING THE STATE-OF-PLAY OF SMART VILLAGES DEVELOPMENT** (corresponding to Task 1):
 - **Mapping progress of Smart Villages initiatives** via Task 1.1, involving Activities 1.1.1: Developing Concept Note; 1.1.2: Inventory of existing information and recent research on the concept of smart villages; 1.1.3: Overview of Member States; 1.1.4: Interactive Geomapping Tool and 1.1.5: Updating interactive Geomapping Tool;
 - **Mapping support made available to Smart Villages in the EU Member States** via Task 1.3 involving Activities 1.3.1: Developing Concept Note and 1.3.2: Report; as well as 1.1.2: Inventory of existing information and research on the concept of smart villages.



2. **WORK PACKAGE 2: IMPROVING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SMART VILLAGES IN FUTURE CAP & OTHER EU POLICIES** (corresponding to Task 2):

- **Effectively sharing, disseminating and raising awareness about lighthouse smart village examples** (Task 2.3) and monitor and analyse the support of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.4).
- **Providing know-how and a framework methodology for developing support schemes in national CAP Strategic Plans** (Task 2.1), sharing lighthouse policy practices (Task 2.2) and monitoring progress & analyse the support of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.4).

In addition to these two core work packages, three **CROSS-CUTTING WORK PACKAGES** will implement all other tasks, namely:

3. **WORK PACKAGE 3: EFFECTIVE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT (corresponding to Task 3)** - this concerns:

- Creating an effective framework for future stakeholders through preparing the ground for **setting-up a European Smart Villages Observatory** (Task 3.1);
- **Putting in place an effective communication and dissemination strategy** for all key stakeholders engaged through the European Smart Villages Observatory (Task 3.2).

4. **WORK PACKAGE 4: CONSIDERING THE CONTRIBUTION AND IMPACT OF SMART VILLAGES** (mostly corresponding to Task 4) in the context of:

- **The crisis situation triggered by Covid-19** (Task 1.2);
- **The EU's priority on 'European Green Deal'** (including Farm-to-For and Biodiversity, Task 4).

5. **WORK PACKAGE 5: DISSEMINATING OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT**

- **Outreach Strategy** to plan dissemination of outcomes through the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory (5.1);
- **Delivering the communication and dissemination strategy** to interested stakeholders ('wider public') in order to raise awareness and engage with a wide range of stakeholders and disseminate the outcomes of the project especially through the website (Tasks 5.2 and 3.2);



- **The Final Conference** to share the outcomes of the project widely (Task 5.3).

Chapter 2 presents the main outcomes of the various work packages and tasks, as well as lessons learnt in relation to each of the main tasks.



II. IMPLEMENTATION, METHODOLOGY AND MAIN OUTCOMES OF THE PROJECT

This part of the report describes the work done under the various work packages and tasks of the Smart Rural 27 project (see also Figure 2).

II.1 Work Package 1: Mapping the state-of-play of Smart Villages developments

2.1.1 Mapping of progress regarding Smart Village initiatives in the EU (Task 1.1)

2.1.1.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 1.1

The purpose of Tasks 1.1 was to analyse the current state of play, provide a general picture and an interactive mapping of the current Smart Villages in the EU Member States. A Concept Note (Activity 1.1.1) was developed early in the project to elaborate on the methods and tools to be used to executing Task 1.1.

Task 1.1 had three main components:

- a) An **inventory** of existing information and recent research on the concept of Smart Villages (Activity 1.1.2);
- b) An **overview of information** on Smart Villages in the Member States (Activity 1.1.3);
- c) An **interactive geomapping tool** and ongoing updates on smart villages (Activities 1.1.4 & 1.1.5).

Concept Note on Task 1.1 (Activity 1.1.1)

The purpose of the Concept Note was to provide a framework, methods and tools for implementing the Smart Villages Inventory, the overview of Smart Villages in Member States and the Geomapping Tool (i.e. the implementation of Task 1.1). The Concept Note was elaborated during the first phase of the project, in the framework of Task 1.1, with particular focus on (i) Developing a Smart Villages Inventory; (ii) Overview of information for each Member State; (iii) The Geomapping Tool.

Inventory of existing information (Activity 1.1.2)

The Smart Villages inventory has been a collection of existing information and research on the concept of Smart Villages. The inventory collection of resources was initially provided in an excel database, and later has been

developed into **a searchable online tool** that was gradually enhanced with new information/ resources.

The Inventory has aimed to give access to relevant Smart Villages resources across various websites/ platforms (including the two Smart Rural projects' websites and outcomes) **according to the interest of the user**. The resources can be searched by country, type of policy, type of organisation, type of action, type of resources and a filter is also available to identify resources added during the Smart Rural 27 project only.

The initial inventory document included a wide range of some 180 resources relevant for Smart Villages (through a mapping process that included the review and identification of Smart Villages resources relevant in an EU context through the involvement of Smart Rural 27 partners, including Smart Rural 21 resources as well as additional ones) in the national and well as European contexts.

The resource collection for the Inventory has built on the systematic recording and collection of information in the Smart Rural 21 project's resources database (1st Preparatory Action). In order to avoid the duplication of work, **it has been decided that the recording of new Smart Villages resources would continue through the Smart Rural 21 resources database** (<https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-inventory/>). In this context, the Smart Rural 21 website has been kept in static form, enhancing it with Smart Rural 27 resources, **including all the material (such as factsheets, reports, presentations, etc.) produced during the Smart Rural 27 project** and other relevant resources identified by the national experts. The specific Smart Rural 27 resources (i.e. resources identified during the Smart Rural 27 project) have been tagged according to the keyword 'Smart Rural 27' and can be filtered in the Inventory (see screenshot in Figure 3). By the end of the project 1 000 resources have been included in the inventory, out of which 300 are added during Smart Rural 27.

The **Inventory received 1 283 hits from 720 users** through the Smart Rural 27 website until end of April 2024 (not counting those directly accessing the Resources Database – including Smart Rural 27 resources - through the Smart Rural 21 website).

Figure 3 : Print screen of the Smart Rural 27 Inventory (embedded in the Smart Rural 21 Resources Database)

Search by keyword

All countries

Type of policy

Type of organisation

Type of action

Type of resource

Smart Rural 27

Type any word...

Results found : **66**
Reset

1
2
3
Next

Smart Rural 27
Latvia
Support for Smart Villages

Zane Seredina - **Latvian Rural Forum** (28/06/2023)

A presentation on the activities and accomplishments supporting Smart Villages of the Latvian Rural Forum was provided during the first LEADER Stakeholder Platform meeting of the Smart Rural 27 project.

Language : English

Type of resource : Presentation

Smart Rural 27
Latvia
FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea towards Smart Villages

Ieva Vitola-Deusa - **FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea (Latvia)** (28/06/2023)

A presentation on the FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea from Latvia was delivered during the first LEADER Stakeholder Platform meeting of the Smart Rural 27 project. It discussed their involvement with Smart Villages and highlighted key insights gained from their work.

Language : English

Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-inventory/>

Overview of Smart Villages for each Member State (Activity 1.1.3)

The main purpose of Activity 1.1.3 was to provide a comprehensive overview/ snapshot of the state-of-play of Smart Villages and smart villages initiatives in Member States that can also serve as a basis of planning other relevant activities (such as the Smart Villages Observatory and the geomapping tool). According to the Technical Specifications, the overview aimed to answer a series of key questions (see Table 2).

The methodology and tools for Activity 1.1.3 were presented in the Concept Note on Task 1.1., including informant stakeholder interviews and desk research, also covering existing smart village examples.

The proposed methodology has created opportunities for identifying and creating initial contacts with stakeholders as well as to understand their specific interests in the project activities and outcomes. The process was led by national experts in each Member State who carried out specific activities based on a series of guidance documents provided by the Core Team, as follows:

Interviews with informant stakeholders: National experts have made initial contacts and carried out interviews with key informants and potential members of the Smart Villages taskforces in each country, including three



categories of stakeholders:

- **Policymakers**, including relevant ministries, EU programme managing authorities, national rural networks, implementing/intermediary bodies, regional development agencies, etc.
- **Other relevant stakeholders** such as LEADER associations, village associations, farming organisations, research organisations;
- **Village representatives** and representatives of selected LEADER Local Action Groups, group of villages / rural communities.

Specific questionnaires were developed for the three types of target groups, and all responses have been recorded in a dedicated online feedback platform.

Information on Smart Villages policy and initiatives has been reviewed by national experts based on desk research of information (especially information published in the context of 'What's happening in my country' pages of the Smart Rural 21 project). The purpose was to get a comprehensive picture about relevant initiatives and information sources.

Identifying existing villages and initiatives: Through the interviews and desk research, national experts have identified an initial set of potential smart village examples in their countries, including smart villages and villages-in-transition for inclusion in the geomapping tool, and exemplary lighthouse examples. An initial list of village examples has been compiled.

A **total of 222 interviews** have been recorded in the project's feedback platform. Further interviews were carried out in some Member States also at a later stage, however, these have not been systematically analysed following the completion of the Overview Report (rather fed into other activities of the Smart Rural 27 project, such as taskforce planning and smart village identification). Out of the 222 interviewees, 27% are policymakers, 26% are village or other local representatives, and 47% are other stakeholders (such as regional representatives, LEADER stakeholders, associations, etc.). Most stakeholders interviewed (62%) were working with the CAP (especially those working with LEADER), however other policies (such as Cohesion Policy – 35% of interviewees and Next Generation EU/ Recovery Fund – 22% of interviewees) were also covered.

Information was systematically collected from Member States. Table 2 presents the key findings of the **Smart Villages Overview Report reflecting the state-of-play as of September 2021** (i.e. at a fairly early stage of the project).



Table 2: Key aspects of the Smart Villages overview & related questions (September 2021)

Key aspect/ heading	Key questions (bold are those included in the TS / others are additional ones)	Key findings of the Overview of Smart Villages report
Process of transformation	<p>How did the process of transformation evolve since 2017 and how long did it take? <i>How did the Smart Villages concept evolve at the local level? How far villages took up the Smart Villages concept? What is the level of interest?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the time of reporting, the formal interpretation of Smart Villages has not yet been developed in the vast majority of Member States (25% indicated that there was some kind of formalised definition of SV). • It was expected that more national ‘interpretations’ of the SV concept will emerge as the CAP SPs are being approved. • The most common smart themes included ‘better access to services’, ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘social innovation’. • Overall stakeholders considered their knowledge about the SV concept fairly good (3.97 on a scale 1 to 5), where local stakeholders (rural communities/ LEADER LAGs) were slightly less confident about their knowledge than policymakers. • Most stakeholders considered Smart Villages as a useful concept (4.36 on a scale of 1 to 5), most participants considering the ‘participatory’ approach’ very important. • Most stakeholders considered the lack of clear framework / definition and the lack of clear ownership as the most challenging aspects of SV.
Smart Villages investments	<p>What investments took place (e.g. how the investment was financed, who are the investors?) How far EU funding has been used (EAFRD, ESIFs, EFSI and other)? <i>How far national funding has been used?</i> <i>How far alternative (e.g. community, private, etc.) funding has been used?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Towards the end of 2021, discussion has started in most Member States on Smart Villages, and around 1/3 of MS also started policy planning on SV, but in the majority of the Member States no planning or concrete actions have started. • Where actions started, the National Rural Networks have often played a key role (e.g. in Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Estonia). • A detailed report on Smart Villages Funding Options (Task 1.3.2 of the project) has elaborated on the issue in more details.



Key aspect/ heading	Key questions (bold are those included in the TS / others are additional ones)	Key findings of the Overview of Smart Villages report
Key influencing factors	What influenced this evolution and how are these factors linked together? <i>What have been the key factors that positively or negatively influenced this process?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most important influencing factor of the evolution of Smart Villages has been the formal programming process (i.e. as the CAP planning advanced, more stakeholders became aware of the concept of Smart Villages) • In some countries, preparatory (e.g. awareness-raising, competition, etc.) activities, especially carried out by National Rural Networks had a positive impact on understanding what Smart Villages are.
Collaborative structures between communities	What influence have collaborative structures between villages, or between villages and cities to transforming rural places into Smart Villages?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviews and analysis (as well as Smart Rural 21 project outcomes) revealed clear evidence that village-to-village cooperation (peer-to-peer learning) has been high on demand. • Some collaborations (e.g. LEADER transnational project/ Interreg Alpine Space project) already took place by the early phases of the project. • The importance of village-to-city cooperation has also been highlighted.
Potential impact in the context of European Green Deal, Farm-to-Fork, Covid-19	To what extent could Smart Villages contribute to cross-cutting goals?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A separate report has been dealing with the linkages between Covid-19 and Smart Villages (see Task 1.2). • The importance of Smart Villages for environmental and climate actions has been highlighted early on (especially in the field of energy efficiency). • The role of LEADER has been expected to be high in terms of supporting the emergence of cross-sectoral / integrated and holistic SV interventions at the local level. • Task 3 has dealt in more details with the linkages between Smart Villages and the European Green Deal.

Source: Report on Overview of Smart Villages in the Member States (Activity 1.1.3)

The interactive Geomapping Tool & updates (Activity 1.1.4 & 1.1.5)

The purpose and concept of the Geomapping Tool

The purpose of the geomapping tool has been **to provide accessible and searchable information on smart villages or villages-in-transition across Europe**. The tool aimed to include for each of the EU Member States the localisation of smart villages (or villages in transition), and link to the share of population and value of investment [...], link to a brief description of the investment and project. It should also include a search function for data and information by geographical area or keywords. It was also expected that the geomapping tool is regularly updated.

The methodology and tools for the Geomapping Tool (Activity 1.1.4) and its updates (Activity 1.1.5) were presented in the Concept Note on Task 1.1. The IT creation of a 'village information/data model' and the planning of the geomapping tool has started under the coordination of partner Agricultural University of Athens (AUA), testing it through the Smart Rural 21 villages' profiles.

The Geomapping Tool aimed to translate Smart Villages characteristics (local rural community, innovative/smart initiatives, smart villages strategy, participatory approach) **into practical criteria**. While the tool aimed to reflect the key characteristics, it was also important not to be too limiting in the approach (allowing a wider pool of villages to be part of the database). In this context, the **EU Smart Villages definition has been operationalised in a pragmatic way**, applying the following Smart Villages criteria:

- The entities in the geomapping tool are **local communities, especially those classified as 'rural' or 'town/suburb'** (according to the EU's DEBURGA classification¹) whenever available;
- The entities have a **local development strategy, vision, or plan** - although not necessarily a smart village strategy - that reflects a longer-term strategic thinking and that can (at least partly) be shared through the geomapping tool;
- Have **at least one smart solution** implemented – based on the judgement of the community and the expert on whether the initiative is inspiring (innovative) for others.

Later – based on experience of data collection - the criterion on 'local strategy' has been softened, in the sense that rural communities that were

¹ The [degree of urbanisation](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/information-data) (DEBURGA) is a classification that indicates the character of an area. Source : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/degree-of-urbanisation/information-data>.

knowledge cluster members (see under Smart Villages Pilot Observatory) but had no strategy to share, were – considered as villages-in-transition and were - also included in the database (even without a strategy to share²).

By the end of the project **94 village profiles have been uploaded** on the Geomapping Database Tool from across Europe; out of these 9 are also lighthouse communities (see Task 2.3 for more details). Despite the efforts made by the national experts, no profiles have been identified and provided in two Member States: Malta and Luxembourg (where due to the territorial proximity and population size, there is often no sharp distinction between rural and urban areas, and therefore 'smart rural' has not been a priority theme). Furthermore, a single community profile has been uploaded in Croatia, Romania and Slovenia, due to lack of responsiveness/ interest from communities and/or lack of strategies to share by 'candidate' communities.

The Geomapping Tool is searchable according to the following aspects:

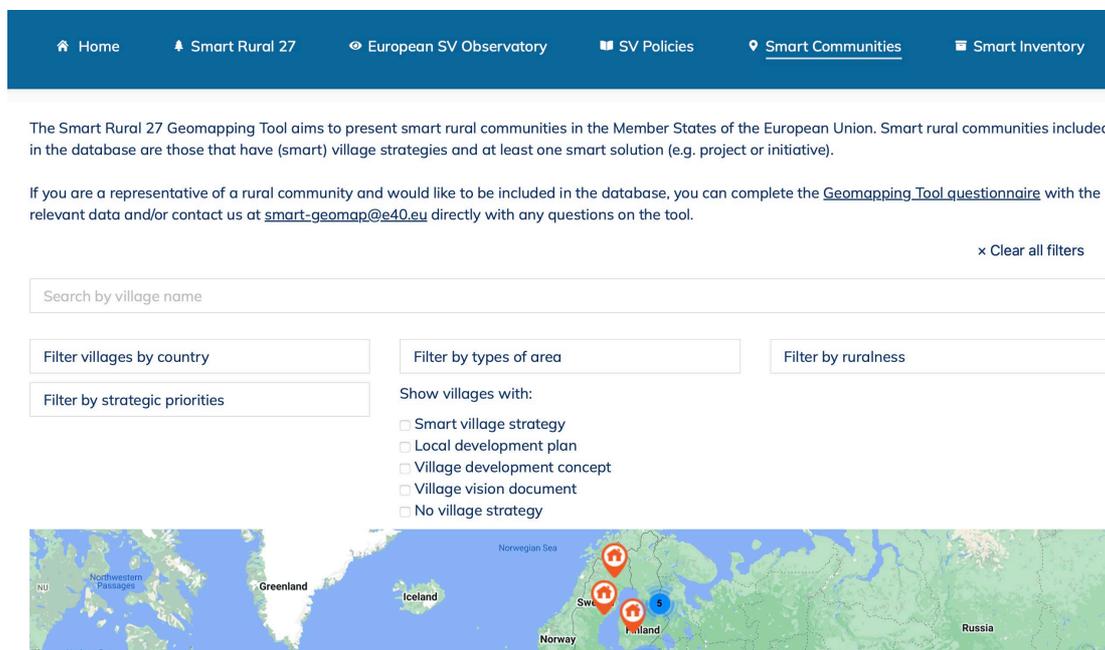
- Country;
- Strategic priorities (Environment, Economy, People, Governance, Living, Mobility & Services)³;
- Type of area (borders, coasts, inner areas, mountain, islands, remote, sparsely populated);

² Out of the 14 cluster member profiles in the database, 8 communities also have strategies/ local plans and 6 communities do not.

³ **People:** Education (schools, children, youth); Improving eSkills/ training; Volunteering; Improving other skills/ training; Engaging youth; Supporting elderly people; Supporting women; Work-life balance; Social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, Other. **Economy:** Entrepreneurship/ business support; Multifunctional (digital) hubs; Supporting job seekers; Research, innovation & knowledge development; Farming and agrifood business; Tourism/ recreation; Inward investment & FDI; Social enterprise; IT / digital businesses; Construction / trades businesses; Recovery- Covid 19; Other. **Living:** Community space; Arts & music; Sports, hobbies & interests; (e)health/ healthcare services; Basic (public) services; Culture & heritage; Safety & crime; Support to newcomers; Housing; Liveable & Tidy Towns; Other. **Environment:** Bioeconomy; Water; Soil; Air; Resource efficiency; Low carbon economy; Renewable energy & energy efficiency; Circular economy / waste management; Habitats and biodiversity; Land management; Climate action; Other; Green Deal. **Mobility:** Improving transport connectivity; Cycling / walking routes; **Digital:** Broadband connection & infrastructure; Use of digitisation & new technologies; Other. **Governance:** Communication; Local stakeholder engagement; Public-private partnership; Cooperation (including with other villages); Improving urban-rural linkages; E-governance; Community capacity-building; Local planning; Smart cities; Open Data; Other.

- Villages with: Smart village strategy; Local development plan, Village development concept, Village vision document, No village strategy;
- Ruralness: rural area or town/suburb.

Figure 4 : Search function in the geomapping tool



Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-communities/>

The tool also included the value of investment for smart solutions (broken down by funding source). However, due to lack of data in many cases⁴, as well as inconsistencies across village profiles, this has not been added to the search function of the database.

Furthermore, the **'level of innovativeness' could not be systematically and factually assessed for all solutions.** This is due to the recognition that what might be innovative and inspiring in one village context, might be 'common practice' in others. Therefore, there was no intention to assess and compare various examples in a systematic way in the database according to their 'smartness' or 'innovativeness'. However, **an informal assessment was carried out** whereby national experts and other stakeholders providing village profiles were asked how far they think a given example is innovative and inspiring for others.

⁴ The elaboration of lighthouse examples also demonstrated that collecting financial data in a coherent and systematic way is highly challenging. Local communities often do not provide this data and/or are not fully aware which funding source a given initiative has been funded from and what the exact amounts are (e.g. EU funding vs. other public funding).

Common information displayed in the village profiles include (see Figure 5):

- Short village profile;
- Country;
- Type of area;
- Degree of urbanisation;
- Location (based on geo-coordinates);
- Strategic document/ village plan;
- (At least one) smart solution(s).

Figure 5 : Sample village profile from Geomapping Tool

The screenshot displays the 'Trojanovice' village profile. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'Home' and 'Village' > 'Trojanovice'. Below this is a large photo of a wooden structure. To the right of the photo is the title 'Trojanovice' and a short text description of the village. Below the photo and text are three informational boxes: 'Country: Czechia', 'Type: Borders, Mountains', and 'Degree of urbanization: Rural, population of 2700'. A map shows the location of Trojanovice. Below the map is a link to 'Check out the village strategy:'. The main content area is titled 'STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT DOCUMENT OF THE MUNICIPALITY OF TROJANOVICE' and contains a section for 'VILLAGE SOLUTIONS' with three items: 'Multifunctional house Hruška', 'Senior transportation and transportation for people with disabilities', and 'The CÉRKA project'.

Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-communities/>



Data collection for the Geomapping Tool

In early 2022, a **survey has been launched** with Smart Rural 21 Come Along! villages⁵ to complete the tool (as the tool was meant to be open and inclusive). Parallel to this process, **national experts were intensively involved in the process of identification** of smart villages and villages-in-transition in their respective Member States. National experts were requested to identify at least 3 smart villages (or villages-in-transition) in their Member States for the geomapping tool based on specific guidance provided by the Core Team.

The collection of geomapping profiles has been ongoing throughout the project, mostly through the work of the national experts. The direct collection/ input from villages has been very limited, i.e. most of the profiles came from national experts despite the availability of a dedicated form and promotion of a public form on the Smart Rural 27 website⁶. The knowledge cluster work of rural communities (see below under Task 2.3) gave a bit of impetus for the collection process; however, the national experts still remained the main promoters and developers of geomapping tool information. The geomapping tool has been visited by **more than 1 000 times during the project duration (until end of April 2024) by almost 300 users.**

2.1.1.2 Lessons learnt from the mapping of progress on Smart Villages (Task 1.1)

At the early stages of the Smart Rural 27 project, Smart Villages knowledge, information and resources have been relatively limited.

The knowledge of stakeholders was also relatively limited, although according to the Overview of the state of play, stakeholders considered their knowledge about Smart Villages fairly good (3.97 on a scale 1 to 5), local stakeholders being slightly less confident about their knowledge than policymakers. Already at the time (September 2021), most stakeholders considered Smart Villages a useful concept (rating it 4.36 on a scale of 1 to 5).

Already during the initial Overview of the state of play on Smart Villages highlighted **the importance of peer-to-peer (including village-to-village) learning** and cooperation, that has been stressed by the interviewees as one of the most important enabling factors of Smart Villages. Furthermore, the **importance of strategic cooperation among**

⁵ Come Along villages are rural communities/ villages that were engaged in the Smart Rural 21 project beyond the 21 villages directly supported by the project.

⁶ Geomapping Tool questionnaire: <https://form.jotform.com/E40/geomapping-tool>.



various policies has also been recognised early on through the interviews carried out for the overview. These aspects remained crucial aspects throughout the Smart Rural project implementation.

As the CAP Strategic Plans emerged and were approved by the end of 2022 (see Task 2.4), more and more information has become available on the practical support and implementation aspects of Smart Villages. Parallel to this, Smart Villages related resources became also available through the analytical work of the Smart Rural 27 project, and the Inventory also got gradually enhanced (mostly including Smart Rural 27 project resources), reaching 300 new entries by the end of the project (which is much higher than the number initially anticipated).

While the EU has provided an indicative definition on Smart Villages⁷, the **translation of this definition into practice has been challenging**. One of the 'testbeds' of applying the definition in practices has been the Smart Rural 27 geomapping tool, where specific criteria have been defined to identify smart villages or villages-in-transition.

Overall, identifying villages / rural communities for the Smart Rural Geomapping Tool has been more challenging than expected. While a good number of entries (94) has been reached, it is lower than initially anticipated.

Having a local vision, strategy or plan proved to be the main limiting criterion. Having some evidence for longer term thinking (such as local plan or strategy) – in addition to stand-alone smart solutions / projects – has been an important feature of Smart Villages to ensure a long-term, sustainable and holistic approach to local development. Villages included in the database (with the exception of knowledge cluster members) were requested to have some kind of evidence for a vision, strategy or plan (even if it's not a smart village strategy) and at least one innovative (inspiring solution). Even with the flexible application of the 'smart village strategy' criterion, several villages either did not have such a plan or (in fewer cases) were not willing to share nor the plan nor a short summary of the plan.

It has been also challenging to create ownership of the village profiles among local rural communities. Although the tool has been promoted as having the advantage of providing visibility to rural communities and their smart approaches, as well as help identify villages with similar interest, this has often been not sufficient incentive for communities to directly engage in providing information for the tool (that still required effort and investment also on behalf of the rural communities if they input the information themselves). Therefore, technical assistance –

⁷ Pilot Project on Smart Eco-Social Villages (2019, Ecorys).

that was mostly provided by national experts – was needed to enhance the geomapping tool contents. However, this has also reduced the ‘ownership’ of village entries by the villages. **Such challenges are common to databases created by projects from dedicated funding**, that also risk getting outdated once project funding/ technical support ends.⁸ Potential future enhancements of the existing database should consider the incentives for communities to provide information and/or ongoing technical assistance to support communities in sharing information at the European level.

While the geomapping tool included information on investment/ financing in Smart Villages as much as possible, such information could not be collected systematically for all entries. Until dedicated funding becomes available, it is hard to define which funding is actually supporting Smart Villages (i.e. tag funding sources according to ‘Smart Villages’). Therefore, data was collected – where stakeholders could provide this – on how smart projects have been funded in a community.

2.1.2 Identify the different types of support to Smart Villages made available in the EU Member States (Task 1.3)

2.1.2.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 1.3

Task 1.3 aimed to provide an initial *review* of the support to Smart villages initiatives offered in every Member State and including EU funding.

The analysis – **presented in a report entitled ‘Funding options to support Smart Villages’** – was based on (1) available Member State information (including enhancing the information collected during Smart Rural 21, in particular through various stakeholder interviews and desk research), (2) review and analysis of funding sources for existing smart initiatives, and (3) analysis of relevant European-level knowledge, including specialist studies carried out by Smart Rural 27 on funding for digitalisation, from the Cohesion Policy (ERDF/ ESF) and available information on Horizon projects.

⁸ Bottom-up / stakeholder networks might be able to provide better incentives for their members to get engaged in sharing information.

2.1.2.2 Lessons learnt from identify the different types of support to Smart Villages (Task 1.3)

The main findings of the 'Funding options to support Smart Villages' report showed that:

- **Smart Villages is a new concept with no clearly defined policy support framework or guidance at the time.** Even the frontrunner countries only just started to experiment with new possibilities of funding, and it was estimated to take several years until an effective Smart Villages support framework can emerge.
- **Extensive research and guidance have been carried out – especially by the ENRD and under the Smart Rural 21 project – to map CAP policy instruments that might support Smart Villages** (such as LEADER, cooperation and digitalisation). Additional work was carried out by Smart Rural 27 under Task 1.3 (and later under Task 2) to better understand the spending patterns.
- The analysis of a sample of rural community projects and smart solutions revealed that **in reality – out of the CAP funding – it is mostly LEADER that had supported Smart Villages-type initiatives and smart solutions to date.** Furthermore, **CLLD has been identified as being the closest in methodology to Smart Villages** – however, genuine multi-funded CLLD experience from the 2014-20 period is relatively limited, and the countries that experimented with joined up management might not continue to do so in the current programming period.
- There were still a lot of uncertainties around the planning of CAP for the next programming period at the time of the analysis (that was later explored under Tasks 2.1 and 2.4).
- **Cohesion Policy and other policy instruments** have also been looked at within the analysis through the Smart Villages lenses. Findings showed that in terms of themes and priorities other funds could largely support rural communities (e.g. focus on climate actions, energy, just transition, digitalisation), etc. **Overall, the access of rural areas - and especially small rural communities - to ERDF and ESF is limited.**
- Overall, the bottom-up review of the analysis on how rural communities are accessing funding highlighted that **relatively limited EU funding is actually accessible for local rural communities.** Within Cohesion Policy, the Regional Operational Programmes and European Territorial Cooperation - Interreg; within the CAP, LEADER seems to be the main (and almost only) source that reaches down to local communities.

- It was argued by the report that **the territorial dimension of support should be strengthened and Smart Village** integrated strategies should be supported through multiple funds without the villages having to think where the funding is actually coming from. However, we are still far from such a 'ideal' support model. The main opportunity has lied in **encouraging and supporting villages to develop more holistic approaches with a long-term vision, and then helping them to identify the right resources** and funding for their innovation projects. The overview showed that many of the available EU programmes and calls should be able to support Smart Villages-type actions. Therefore, **capacity-building is needed, as local rural communities have very little knowledge and capacity to follow-up** on the huge diversity of funding options (some of which might not readily be available to them) and submit applications in response to these.

Due to the lack of access to EU funding, **local rural communities seem to largely rely on other funding sources (municipality, private, foundations, etc.) and own resources.** Due this situation, small communities – when it comes to EU programmes and funding - often have felt left behind.

As far as the process is concerned, the main finding was that **carrying out a comprehensive analysis at the time has been challenging as it was quite early in the Smart Villages evolution.** In particular during the 2014-2020 programming period there has been no dedicated funding or interventions on Smart Villages, therefore, only interventions with indirect relevance could be identified. Other challenges included the (1) delay in the adoption of the CSP Regulation (December 2021) and consequently the approval of the CAP Strategic Plans (December 2022). This deliverable was due earlier than this process (September 2021) and therefore, no information was available on the new strategic plans at the time; (2) most Smart Rural 27 national and regional taskforces were not yet operational; and (3) interviews were hard to carry out due to Covid-19 and the summer period that just fell before the completion of the report. Finally, the Smart Rural 27 project largely overlapped with the Smart Rural 21 project implementation, where comprehensive information has already been collected; as well as the ENRD has carried out relevant policy analysis before. The analytical work has built on these findings to avoid duplication.

II.2 Work Package 2: Improving the development of Smart Villages in the future CAP and other policies

The main purpose of Task 2 was to provide know-how on Smart Villages support schemes in the CAP strategic plans and other policies, especially through the analysis of the support framework – including the CAP Strategic Plans – in all Member States and awareness-raising concerning support and Smart Villages lighthouse examples. Ultimately, Task 2 aimed **to improve the development and implementation of CAP Strategic Plans** as well as other EU policies and programmes with regard to Smart Villages.

2.2.1 Provide know-how and a framework methodology for developing support schemes for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.1)

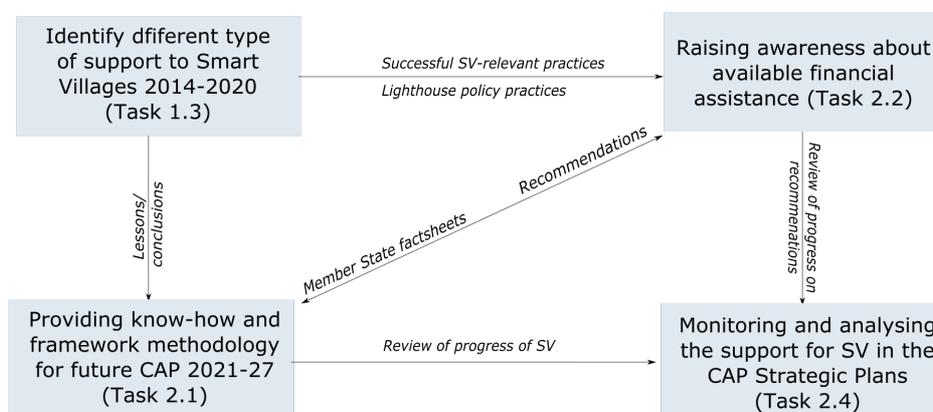
2.2.1.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 2.1

The purpose of Task 2.1 was to draw up a factsheet per EU Member State highlighting how the use of EAFRD has contributed to the emergence of Smart Villages during the 2014-2020 programming period in the respective Member State” and “provide recommendations on the possible options that may be considered by Member States in order to provide support for Smart Villages. The task concerned the development of a Concept Note (Activity 2.1.1) and a factsheet for each Member State (Activity 2.1.2).

Concept Note (Activity 2.1.1)

A Concept Note has been developed by Month 9 (also covering Task 2.2 & 2.4) setting out the implementation principles of Smart Villages. The Concept Note has highlighted the strong synergies between Tasks 1.3, 2.1, 2.2. and 2.4 (as presented in Figure 6).

Figure 6 : Interlinkages between Tasks 1.3, 2.1, 2.2 and 2.4



Source: Concept Note (Activity 2.1.1)

In the context of Task 2.1 (Member State factsheets), the Concept Note set out the purpose as providing an accessible overview on how various funds (especially EAFRD 2014-2020) contributed to the emergence of Smart Villages as well as how future policy options might do - including reference to further useful resources and information sources – for each Member State. The Concept Note also set out the development of taskforce action plans (as roadmaps for selected Member States where there is strong interest in working on improving the Smart Villages support framework).

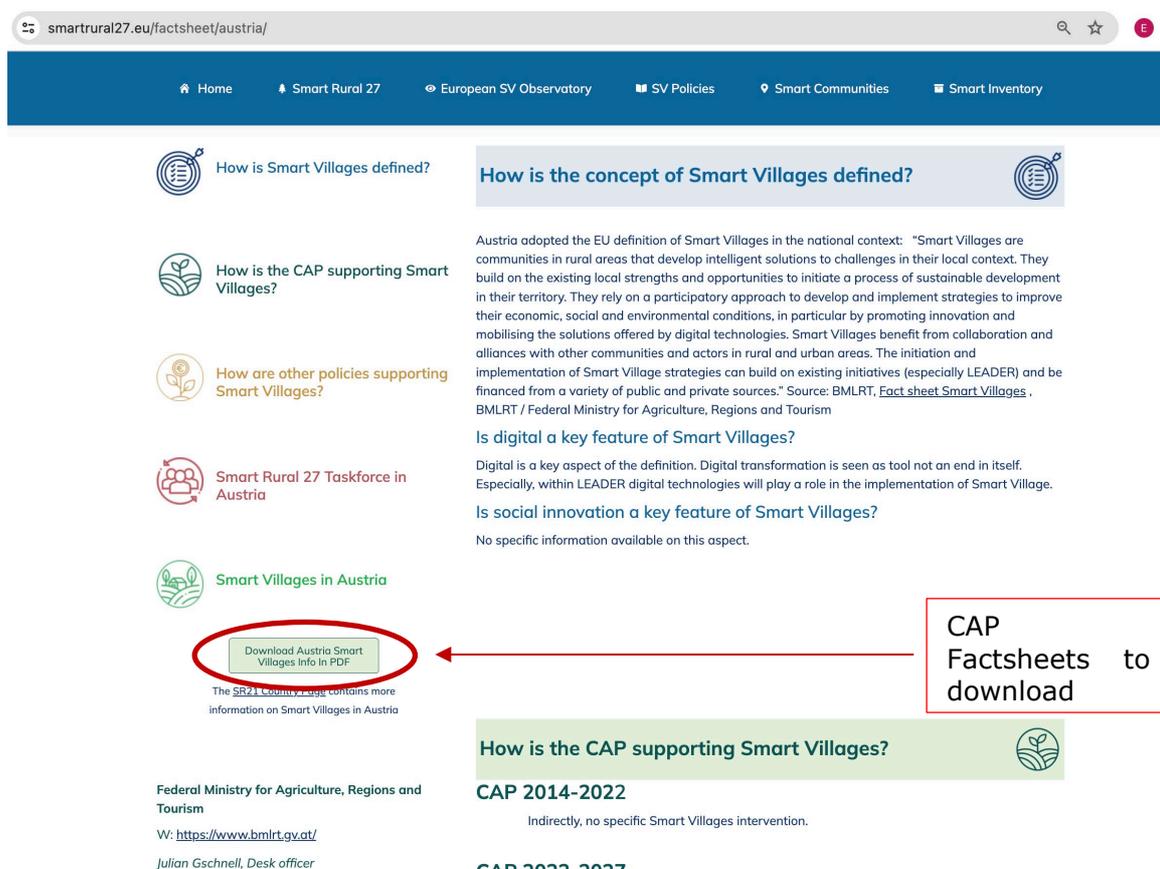
Member State factsheets & taskforce action plans (Activity 2.1.2)

Factsheets have been developed for each Member State, **as well as taskforce action plans** in those Member States where a taskforce has been set up (see Task 3 for further details). This work has strongly built on the information collected during the Smart Rural 27 project and reviewed in the context of Task 1.3.

28 Member State pages⁹ were developed and factsheets have been uploaded on the SR27 webpage under each country page.

⁹ Two for Belgium: Flanders and Wallonia.

Figure 7 : Snapshot of sample country page and location of factsheet download



The screenshot shows the website interface for Austria. The main content area is titled "How is the concept of Smart Villages defined?". Below this, there are several sections: "How is the CAP supporting Smart Villages?", "How are other policies supporting Smart Villages?", "Smart Rural 27 Taskforce in Austria", and "Smart Villages in Austria". In the "Smart Villages in Austria" section, a button labeled "Download Austria Smart Villages Info in PDF" is circled in red. A red arrow points from a box on the right labeled "CAP Factsheets to download" to this button. Below the button, it says "The SB21 Urbanisation agenda contains more information on Smart Villages in Austria". At the bottom of the page, there is contact information for the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism, including the website URL <https://www.bmlrt.gv.at/> and the name Julian Gschnell, Desk officer.

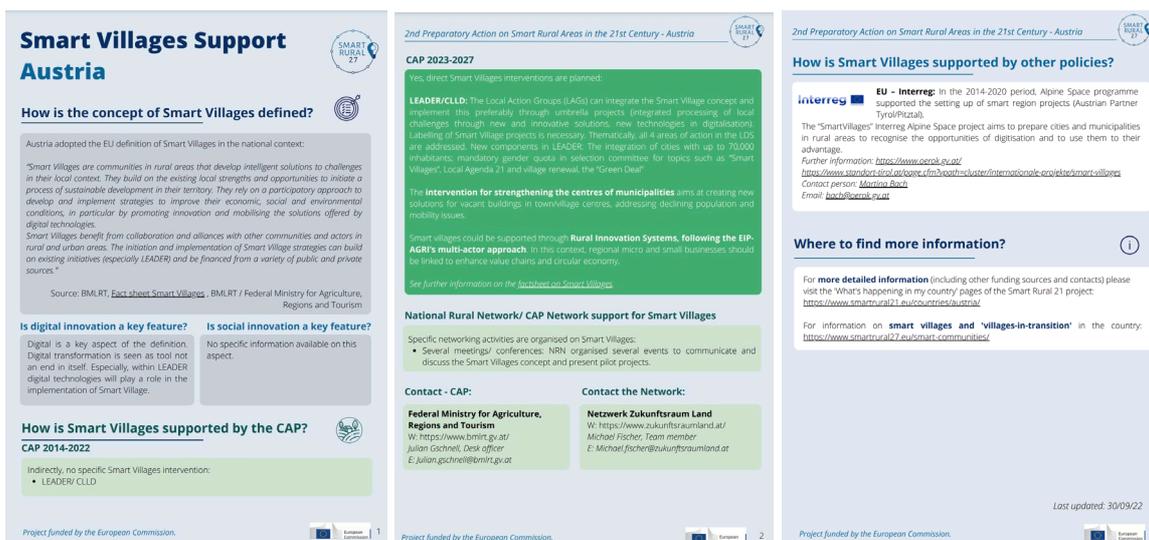
Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/factsheet/austria/>

The Member State factsheets (downloadable in a PDF format) contain information on:

- How is the concept of Smart Villages defined?
- How is Smart Villages supported through the CAP?
- National Rural Austria Networks/ National CAP Networks support for Smart Villages
- CAP contact details
- How is Smart Villages supported by other policies?
- Where to find more information?

Some of the Member State factsheets were later updated.

Figure 8 : Sample layout of country factsheet



The image shows a sample layout of a country factsheet for Austria, divided into three columns. Each column has a header and a 'Project funded by the European Commission' logo at the bottom.

- Column 1: Smart Villages Support Austria**
 - How is the concept of Smart Villages defined?**

Austria adopted the EU definition of Smart Villages in the national context:

"Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that develop intelligent solutions to challenges in their local context. They build on the existing local strengths and opportunities to initiate a process of sustainable development in their territory. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement strategies to improve their economic, social and environmental conditions, in particular by promoting innovation and mobilising the solutions offered by digital technologies.

Smart Villages benefit from collaboration and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and implementation of Smart Village strategies can build on existing initiatives (especially LEADER) and be financed from a variety of public and private sources."

Source: BMLRT, Fact-sheet Smart Villages, BMLRT / Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism
 - Is digital innovation a key feature?**

Digital is a key aspect of the definition. Digital transformation is seen as tool not an end in itself. Especially, within LEADER digital technologies will play a role in the implementation of Smart Village.
 - Is social innovation a key feature?**

No specific information available on this aspect.
 - How is Smart Villages supported by the CAP?**

CAP 2014-2022

Indirectly, no specific Smart Villages intervention:

 - LEADER/ CLLD
- Column 2: 2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Austria**
 - CAP 2023-2027**

Yes, direct Smart Villages interventions are planned:

LEADER/CLLD: The Local Action Groups (LAGs) can integrate the Smart Village concept and implement this preferably through umbrella projects (integrated processing of local challenges through new and innovative solutions, new technologies in digitisation). Labelling of Smart Village projects is necessary. Thematically, all 4 areas of action in the LAGs are addressed. New components in LEADER: The integration of cities with up to 70,000 inhabitants; mandatory gender quota in selection committees for topics such as "Smart Villages" Local Agenda 21 and village renewal; the "Green Deal"

The intervention for strengthening the centres of municipalities aims at creating new solutions for vacant buildings in low-village centres, addressing declining population and mobility issues.

Smart villages could be supported through **Rural Innovation Systems, following the EIP-AGRI's multi-actor approach**. In this context regional micro and small businesses should be linked to enhance value chains and circular economy.

See further information on the [factsheet on Smart Villages](#)
 - National Rural Network/ CAP Network support for Smart Villages**

Specific networking activities are organised on Smart Villages:

 - Several meetings/ conferences: NRN organised several events to communicate and discuss the Smart Villages concept and present pilot projects.
 - Contact - CAP:**

Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Regions and Tourism
W: <https://www.bmlrt.gv.at/>
Julian Gschneil, Desk officer
E: Julian.gschneil@bmlrt.gv.at
 - Contact the Network:**

Netzwerk Zukunftsraum Land
W: <https://www.zukunftsraumland.at/>
Michael Fischer, Team member
E: Michael.fischer@zukunftsraumland.at
- Column 3: 2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Austria**
 - How is Smart Villages supported by other policies?**

EU - Interreg: In the 2014-2020 period, Alpine Space programme supported the setting up of smart region projects (Austrian Partner Tyrol/Pitztal).

The "Smart Villages" Interreg Alpine Space project aims to prepare cities and municipalities in rural areas to recognise the opportunities of digitisation and to use them to their advantage.

Further information: <https://www.azeeb.gv.at/>
<https://www.stg.at/interreg/interreg-alpine-space/interreg-alpine-space-smart-villages>
Contact person: [Marina Bach](mailto:Marina.Bach)
Email: bach@azeeb.gv.at
 - Where to find more information?**

For **more detailed information** (including other funding sources and contacts) please visit the "What's happening in my country" pages of the Smart Rural 21 project: <https://www.smart-rural21.eu/countries/austria/>

For information on **smart villages and "villages-in-transition"** in the country: <https://www.smart-rural27.eu/smart-communities/>

Source: https://www.smart-rural27.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SR27-Factsheet-Austria_30.09.2022.pdf

At the time of completion of Task 2.1, taskforces had been set up in 7 Member States and were developed in four further countries. By the end of the project 11 taskforces were set up and developed a taskforce roadmap¹⁰ (see further details under Task 3).

2.2.1.2 Lessons from developing the initial Member State factsheets (Task 2.1)

The delay in the CAP programming has also caused delays in the activities of Task 2.1, especially the setting up of the taskforces and analysis of the CAP Strategic Plans (SP). The in-depth analysis of CAP Strategic Plans could only start fully once they were finalised (i.e. early 2023) - see also Task 2.4.

Much flexibility was allowed in terms of the setup and timing of Member State taskforces (and in this context the development of relevant roadmaps/ action plans), in order to ensure that taskforces are set up in countries/ regions where there is clear interest in getting engaged in such activities. This activity – as well as several others – recognised that Smart Villages has been a largely evolving concept, and accordingly the interest of stakeholders has also been dynamic. Therefore, the setup of taskforces has been encouraged until the end of the project.

¹⁰ Initial roadmaps/ plans were developed and/or taskforces considered in other countries (DE, EE, EL, ES, HR, RO, SE), however, these have not finally become operational within the project. There was no strong interest expressed in other countries.



2.2.2 Raise awareness about available financial assistance for Smart Villages in Member States (Task 2.2)

2.2.2.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 2.2

Concept Note (Activity 2.2.1)

The Concept Note on Task 2.1 – 2.4 had foreseen the Blueprint report to build on the analysis of a wide range of available information. This report aimed to bring together the knowledge accumulated to date through research carried in the Smart Rural 27 project and beyond, as well as relevant examples identified, including:

- **Analysis and report on funding options**, with specific focus on how various funds, including specialist studies on other EU funds and digitalisation (Task 1.3);
- **Member State factsheets** on current and future Smart Villages support schemes - including the CAP and beyond – as well as national/ regional **taskforces** (Task 2.1 & Task 3);
- **Highlights of successful (lighthouse) policy practices** that effectively contribute to Smart Villages implementation (Task 2.3);
- **Highlights from lighthouse village examples**, i.e. successful smart villages approaches benefitting from EU funding (Task 2.3).

The Blueprint Report (Activity 2.2.2)

The Smart Villages Blueprint Report aimed **to present successful Smart Villages development models and investment/ financing solutions** and raise awareness about these.

The Blueprint Report has been structured as follows:

- **The 'Overview'** section provided a snapshot of the **Smart Villages definition** and its application in various Member States;
- The section on the **'Smart Villages Policy Framework'** provided information on how Smart Villages could be supported through the CAP and beyond (available policy instruments), highlighting relevant regulatory provisions and examples (Austria, Czechia);
- The **'Territorial instruments to support Smart Villages'** section elaborated more on the specific instruments that can support Smart Villages, with particular focus on LEADER/ CLLD and ITI (including examples);
- The section on **'Support for smart solutions in relevant thematic domains'** highlighted how specific smart solutions had been supported through various policy funds and instruments, linked to



the four key thematic areas of the Long Term Vision for Rural areas (stronger, more resilient, more connected and more prosperous), demonstrated through specific village examples;

- The relevance of local cooperation was highlighted in the section on '**Support for the cooperation of Smart Village initiatives**', including LEADER transnational cooperation project(s), urban-rural cooperation (especially on themes such as rural mobility), European Territorial Cooperation / Interreg support (including the Alpine Space and cross-border projects on Smart Villages) and Horizon as an instrument to enable multi-actor cooperation;
- The section on '**Animation and technical support for Smart Villages**' highlighted the importance of capacity-building and all levels, in particular the role of National CAP Networks, including some initial findings/ examples on how National Rural Networks/ National CAP Networks in supporting Smart Villages, the role of LEADER LAGs in local animation and support, and the support and tools provided by the Smart Rural 21 project (1st Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century).

2.2.2.2 Lessons learnt through analysing available financial assistance for Smart Villages in Member States (Task 2.2)

The Blueprint Report has brought together available knowledge – demonstrated through a series of examples – on how Smart Villages can be supported by various policy instruments and tools, including the CAP and other EU policies. However, **it has still been relatively early in the EU programming process and project implementation** to analyse all relevant data. Among others, while lighthouse examples have been identified in both the policy and village contexts, these have not yet been elaborated in full detail. Despite these shortcomings due to the timing, the **Blueprint Report has provided a comprehensive overview of relevant financing options** based on information available at the time.

The **main lessons learnt through the analysis presented in the report** can be summarised as follows:

- **Initial research identified 7 Member States with** – formal or less formal - **specific Smart Villages definitions**¹¹: Austria, Czechia, France, Ireland, Latvia, Slovenia and Poland. Furthermore, in some 12 Member States, digital innovation seemed to feature strongly in the

¹¹ Note that a more up-to-date overview had been provided by the CAP analysis at a later stage.

Smart Villages concept, whereas social innovation had been identified as a defining feature in some 11 Member States. (NB: This data have been updated later through the CAP analysis.)

- **The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had been identified as the key policy to support tool for Smart Villages.** The European Commission has proposed a more flexible system for the CAP and the way in which Member States design their CAP Strategic Plans in the 2021-2027 programming period. Member States and regions have been encouraged to adapt a wide range of existing policy tools in ways that create the enabling framework for smart villages to emerge at the local level.
- **Smart Villages concept has been expected to bring added value and innovation** - in terms of supporting innovative, integrated **local community-led approaches** in rural areas, through implementing smart actions at the local community level; reinforcing **cooperation, exchange of experience** and new alliances; helping communities develop integrated long-term plans and strategies, building on existing flagship initiatives, existing local plans and project ideas; **creating synergies** with various “higher” (geographical or administrative) level plans, strategies and programmes; and **building capacity in local communities** in terms of strategic planning, technical expertise to plan and implement smart solutions and capacity-building to access funding.
- **Rural proofing of policies could shed light on how far Cohesion Policy has allocated funding to relevant thematic objectives within rural areas.** For instance the Smart Rural 27 ‘Funding Options for Smart Villages in Member States’ report has highlighted that in 2014-2020, Cohesion Policy invested €34.8 billion of funding into rural areas, which corresponds to 9% (only) of the total - although it has to be noted that 58% of the funding is not associated with any type of territory.
- **A series of instruments have been identified to support Smart Villages**, demonstrated through specific examples, such as **LEADER/ CLLD** (including Raudanmaa – Finland and Torup – Denmark as examples) and other territorial instruments such as **Integrated Territorial Instrument - ITA** (including Revitalisation Programme of Pinhal Region in Portugal as example).
- Furthermore, the report highlighted the **linkages with the four priority areas of the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA)**: stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas, demonstrated through a series of smart projects and initiatives.

- The report also stressed **the relevance of cooperation to boost Smart Villages**, including **urban-rural** cooperation (e.g. Mouans-Sartoux in France), **LEADER transnational cooperation** (such as the LEADER Transnational Smart Village project led by Kantri Ry – Finland), the **European Territorial Cooperation – Interreg** (e.g. the Alpine Space cooperation project on Smart Villages and the Smart Villages project implemented at the border of Hungary and Slovakia). Furthermore, relevant Horizon projects were also identified at the time, such as DRURAL, AURORAL, SIMRA, RUBIZMO, RURALIZATION, RURACTION, DESIRA AND COMETS (NB: further relevant Horizon projects were identified later on by the Smart Rural 27 project).
- Finally, the **importance of animation and capacity-building** – especially the role of NRNs – were stressed and demonstrated through concrete examples in the report, such as activities of the French, Italian and Swedish National Rural Networks (at the time), the Smart Villages capacity-building programme in Estonia and the Smart Rural 21 project itself.

2.2.3 Set-up a group of lighthouse examples (Task 2.3)

2.2.3.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 2.3

Concept Note (Activity 2.3.1)

The Contractor presented a Concept Note that elaborated on the methods and tools to be used for executing the task. Among others initial criteria has been set for selecting the lighthouse examples, reflecting the basic characteristics of Smart Villages:

- The example selected should have a **(holistic) smart village strategy** or plan¹² (i.e. the focus will not be only on individual successful initiatives);
- The selected examples should have **some 'innovative' and inspiring solutions** that can demonstrate social, digital or other type of innovation;
- **Various geographical contexts and thematic areas** are to be covered;

¹² It is important to note that an integrated strategy **does not preclude** having a dominant headline theme, indeed each lighthouse example also has a specific thematic focus.

- Each **example should demonstrate the successful use of EU funding**, i.e. it is important that at least part of the transformation in the village is clearly attributable to the contribution of EU funding;
- Each example **should be willing to cooperate with the project**, in particular be open to share experience.

The Concept Note also set out the basic approach to setting up and implementing a Promotional Strategy (see Activity 2.3.3).

Setting up lighthouse examples (Activity 2.3.2)

Lighthouse examples were identified by the national experts, who included **39 examples from 18 countries** in the initial survey. More detailed elaboration of examples started following this initial identification, and a specific template was developed to contribute to the selection of lighthouse examples. Based on a review of the quality of the information provided and existing knowledge about the Smart Rural 21 villages, a detailed set of **25 potential lighthouse examples (covering 15 Member States)** were presented in the Report on 'Set-up a group of lighthouse examples' (Activity 2.3.2).

The identification of lighthouse examples was mostly carried out by the **national expert** (who also consulted other types of stakeholders nationally). National experts mapped the Member State contexts and consulted with key stakeholders, and as such **offered a systematic coverage of all Member States and type of areas** in the identification of examples. The process of lighthouse identification was carried out parallel to mapping rural communities for the geomapping tool (see Activity 1.1.2) – i.e. identifying villages for the geomapping tool (in each Member State) was an initial step for identifying lighthouse communities.

National experts were requested to identify at least 3 smart villages (or villages-in-transition) in their Member States for the geomapping tool based on specific guidance provided by the Core Team. Through the process of identifying villages for the geomapping tool, the **formal Smart Villages definition has been operationalised in a pragmatic way** (i.e. smart villages criteria – local level, innovative, strategic - applied in the case of villages to be included in the database).

A **more detailed elaboration and assessment** of the examples started at the end of 2021 and was running during 2022 based on the criteria defined already in the Concept Note (Activity 2.3.1) and later reinforced in the Activity 2.3.2 report.

Based on the detailed assessment, including follow-up discussions with national experts (as foreseen in the Activity 2.3.2 Report¹³), the list of potential lighthouse examples was further discussed and elaborated based on the criteria defined (see above).

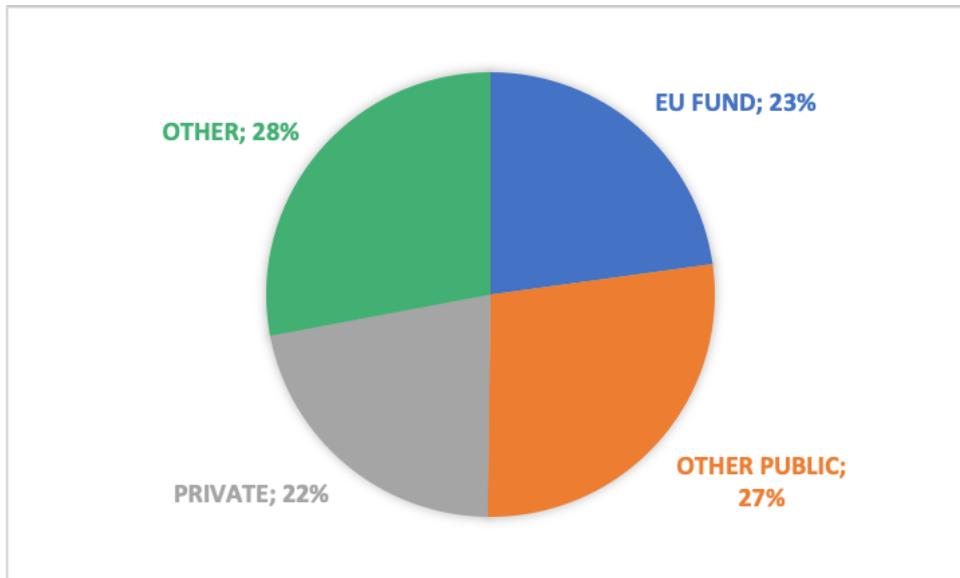
At this point, the list **had to be considerably narrowed down mostly due to the criterion that “each example should demonstrate the successful use of EU funding”** – as it turned out that several lighthouses identified by experts (i.e. qualifying according to the criteria of having (1) inspiring smart solutions, (2) strategic approach, (3) strong participatory approach) did not seem to receive EU funding to date.

Finally, the **9 examples elaborated into detailed lighthouse examples** to date received EU financing in one form or another (see summary graph below):

- 1 Athienou (Cyprus);
- 2 Häradsbäck (Sweden);
- 3 Lormes (France);
- 4 Ovenhausen (Germany);
- 5 Ostana (Italy);
- 6 Raudanmaa (Finland);
- 7 Samsø (Denmark);
- 8 Stanz (Austria);
- 9 Tomaszyn (Poland).

¹³ The examples were discussed with selected experts (dedicated expert group) in countries where relevant examples were identified.

Figure 9 : Funding sources of lighthouse example smart solutions



Source: E40 analysis based on lighthouse example data

These **have been classified to cover at least the themes defined in the Technical Specifications** (see Table 3 on next page). Due to the integrated and holistic approach of the villages – presented in the factsheets as the smart journey – most examples fit under several thematic categories.



Table 3: Allocation of lighthouse examples under selected thematic categories

	Austria Stanz	Cyprus Athienou	Finland Raudanma a	Denmark Samso	France Lormes	Germany Ovenhouse n	Italy Ostana	Poland Tomaszyn	Sweden Häradsbäck
Digitalisation (Digital Single Market)	Digitalisation in energy & token system		Optical fibre network	Broadband project (fibre)	Rural digital hub	Digital services		Agricultural robotics	High-speed internet for households
Advanced technology	Token system and blockchain	LED Lighting system		Night light project / sea life protection	Digital hub	Digital services		innovative agricultural techniques	
Urban-rural links			Educational children farm		Co-working (remote work)		Tourism/visitors	Farm-to-Fork	Tourism, along main road: car charging
Climate-neutral, green, competitive and inclusive economy	Renewable energy		Children farm business	Carbon-neutral island projects			Renewable energy, mobility	Regenerative agriculture	Renewable energy, car charging
Sharing and collaborative economy	Car-sharing, energy community	Volunteering	Water cooperative fibre network	Community-owned wind turbines	“Fair Companie” platform	Digital village platform, e-health	Cultural centre	Cooperative business model	



Promotion strategy & its implementation (Activity 2.3.3)

The Promotional strategy concerned setting out the way in which lighthouse examples had been and should be promoted. **The format of the examples has evolved over time**, without altering the main principles presented in the Concept Note and 'Setting-up Lighthouse Examples reports', namely:

- (i) **simple accessible format** highlighting (territorial village) context and main innovations (not as isolated actions but as part of an integrated/ holistic approach);
- (ii) **making examples easily accessible** through the geomapping tool;
- (iii) **using lighthouse examples in peer-to-peer exchanges** (see Knowledge Clusters below);
- (iv) complementing the factsheets with **creative ways of communication** (such as short documentaries and podcasts).

i) Simple & accessible format

Lighthouse examples have been presented in a **simple and accessible factsheet format** highlighting:

- The village / geographical context;
- The 'smartness', i.e. what is innovative about the example;
- The smart journey – integrated/ holistic approach of the village, demonstrating that examples are not just stand-alone smart solutions but part of a longer (strategic) journey, including information on EU (and other) funding sources for each initiative;
- Smart theme/ solution in focus (i.e. the main interest/ focus of the villages at the moment);
- Participatory approach: how the different sectors have collaborated (based on the 'quadruple helix' innovation model¹⁴) and how the community has been involved in the process.

¹⁴ The Quadruple Helix Model of innovation recognises four major actors in the innovation system: science, policy, industry, and society.

Figure 10 : Sample factsheet format

Basic village

Village context

Explaining in a nutshell the 'smartness' / innovative aspects of the village approach

Smart Journey (holistic village approach) on two pages with timeline

Funding sources (including EU financing) for each initiative

Final Report

In Focus:
Energy production and storage for crisis preparedness

Goal:
The aim of Häradsbäck is to become as **self sufficient** and **resilient** as possible with regard to **electricity supply to vital services**, especially preparing for block-outs due to weather conditions or other crisis situations. In order to reach its goal the village is planning to build a solar voltaic park for energy production and storage (in hydrogen). With this action Häradsbäck aims to **increase its crisis preparedness** to be able to supply vital services (e.g. keeping the fridges in the shop running, being able to supply food in the restaurant, heating the elderly home and keeping the pump station for drinking water) running at least for 14 days in case of electricity shortage. The main technological innovation of the planned solar park will be the conversion of electricity in hydrogen gas at a village level to manage local storage of energy.

Experience to date:
Through LEADER and The National Innovation Agency (Vinnova) the association received support to carry out a **feasibility study** with two main objectives:

- 1) To get an overview about the preconditions, construction and operation of the planned solar park including solar cells, production of hydrogen gas, storage of hydrogen and a hydrogen fuel station (supported by LEADER, Mar 2022- June 2022)
- 2) To prepare theoretical & technological design of the solar voltaic park and to increase crisis preparedness (supported by Vinnova National Innovation Agency, Jun 2022-ongoing)

The feasibility study will be finalised in 2023 and will be complementary to the ordinary system for managing a crisis and contribute to the transition towards a fossil free society. The aim of the study is to increase the awareness about the impact of a crisis on the society and its inhabitants and consider how local communities can be organised to meet these challenges. The feasibility study will have the project specifications to be able to make applications for the investment funding.

"Ofta när besvär dyker upp i Sverige 2019) made an impact that we weren't prepared for. Two things were very important: First of all we did not get any help from the subsidies, we had to do everything by ourselves, we had to rely on our neighbour, on each other (...) We didn't have electricity for more than 30 days (...) So we thought later that we could do something that is good not only for Häradsbäck. We would like to build a model for villages not only in Sweden but maybe in whole Europe to make sure to have local facilities, which is prepared in crises. The other main thing was also how to make sure that at least part of the society would have life without electricity. If part of Sweden is disconnected from the electricity system we would have still the possibility to supply those five (strategically important e.g. water supply, optical fiber etc.) points of the village at least for 14 days."

Mette Adolffsson, Project manager Härändabygden AB (svb)

Next steps:

- Preparation of proof of concept
- Construction of pilot solar voltaic park
- Preparation of 'digital twin template' of the project description to share openly with other communities to plan their own project
- Finding funding for the investment
- To overcome possible administrative hurdles regarding the delivery of electricity direct to specific premises and not out on the grid.
- Solving technological challenges in the small scale plant for conversion of electricity to hydrogen and the storage

Theme that the village is currently working on/ can share experience with others

Personal quote and ideas from village representatives

Next steps the village is planning to take

Governance & participation

Local governance (public sector): Häradsbäck is a village in the municipality of Älmhult, where the public local administration is based. There are no elected leaders for administration at the village level. Through direct contacts between the municipality and the board of the village association and also with the project manager, the public sector is present also in the local development process.

Local community (civil society): There are many civil society and business associations in the parish of Härändabygden, including Häradsbäck village. They are associations for sports, farmers, management of sports fishing, retired people, culture, local history and culture etc. They are all represented in the village association. Most of the inhabitants are members of at least one association, even if not all are active members. There is no specific communication platform beside the web site of the **village association** and the individual associations. Direct personal contacts work well.

Businesses (social enterprises): The village association is the owner of the non-profit shareholder company, which is running the businesses like the shop, the restaurant and the tourism services. So the private sector is in a sense embedded in the village association. The local branch of the farmers federation (LRF) is also an important actor in the parish, and is represented in the village association. The non-profit shareholder company will be managing the solar voltaic business, but the premises will probably be owned by the village association.

Research (scientific sector): Professor Malin Tillmar at the Linne university is doing research on the development process in Häradsbäck. The theme of the research project (that includes 5 other villages beside Häradsbäck) is "Entrepreneurship for socio-ecological change in the countryside". The research project is about the key factors that are necessary to initiate and run development processes in rural areas.

Community engagement process

The community engagement is channeled through the village association, its member organisations and the non-profit shareholder company. The village association, founded in 1980, formed in 2018 a non-profit shareholder company (Härändabygden AB), a company with limitations for how to use profits with 10 different associations in the parish (sports, farmers, culture, etc.) as shareholders.

Since the number of village inhabitants (158) and for the whole parish (450) is low, the direct contacts between people are easy. The 10 associations forming the shareholders in the Härändabygden AB are representing most of the inhabitants.

The board members represent the associations and all their members. Many inhabitants are members in more than one association. Through their representatives in the board of Härändabygden AB they have a direct voice in the planning and implementation of activities and projects. With all the services offered in Häradsbäck, the shop, the restaurant and the activity hall have become a place where the inhabitants meet and can engage and discuss the development and the needs for the community. There are often informal discussions and suggestions on what has been done and what is planned. The Härändabygden AB is also inviting to information meetings to keep the inhabitants informed and to have a transparent development work.

Contact: Härändabygden AB
Contact person: Mette Adolffsson
Email: mette.adolffsson@haradsback.se

Further Information:
Website of Häradsbäck: <https://haradsback.se>
Smart Rural 27 village profile of Häradsbäck: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/village/haradsback/>

Local governance information based on the Quadruple Helix innovation model (public, civic, private and research cooperation)

Participatory approach – How the community has been engaged

Contact & where to fund further information (including SR21 and SR27 pages)

Source: [Lighthouse communities - Smart Rural 27](#)

ii) Making examples easily accessible

Lighthouse examples have been made available through a dedicated lighthouse page: The lighthouse examples are also accessible in the Geomapping Tool (see Figure 11).

Figure 11 : Sample geomapping tool profile of lighthouse example

Home > Village > Häradbäck

Häradbäck

Häradbäck is a small village not so far from the municipality centre of Ålmhult. It has a several decades long history of strategic development. The aim is to be more attractive, more resilient, offering better access to services, creating jobs and fostering a spirit of togetherness. Through the village association a joint limited company has been formed. The shareholders are 10 different associations (sports, farmers, culture etc). Many projects have been implemented, owned and managed by the company. Today there exist a grocery store, a café, a library and housing for elderly, all run by the village company. There is also an "all-service company", an activity park and an activity hall with a bar, boule, biljard, shuffleboard etc.

Lighthouse in Renewable Energy

The aim of Häradbäck is to become as self sufficient and resilient as possible with regard to electricity supply to vital services, especially preparing for block-outs due to weather conditions or other crisis situations. In order to reach its goal the village is planning to build a solar voltaic park for energy production and storage (in hydrogen). With this action Häradbäck aims to increase its crisis preparedness to be able to supply vital services (e.g keeping the fridges in the shop running, being able to supply food in the restaurant, heating the elderly home and keeping the pump station for drinking water) running at least for 14 days in case of electricity shortage. The main technological innovation of the planned solar park will be the conversion of electricity in hydrogen gas at a village level to manage local storage of energy.

READ
Factsheet of Häradbäck

LISTEN
Podcast of Häradbäck

WATCH
Video of Häradbäck

Country: Sweden

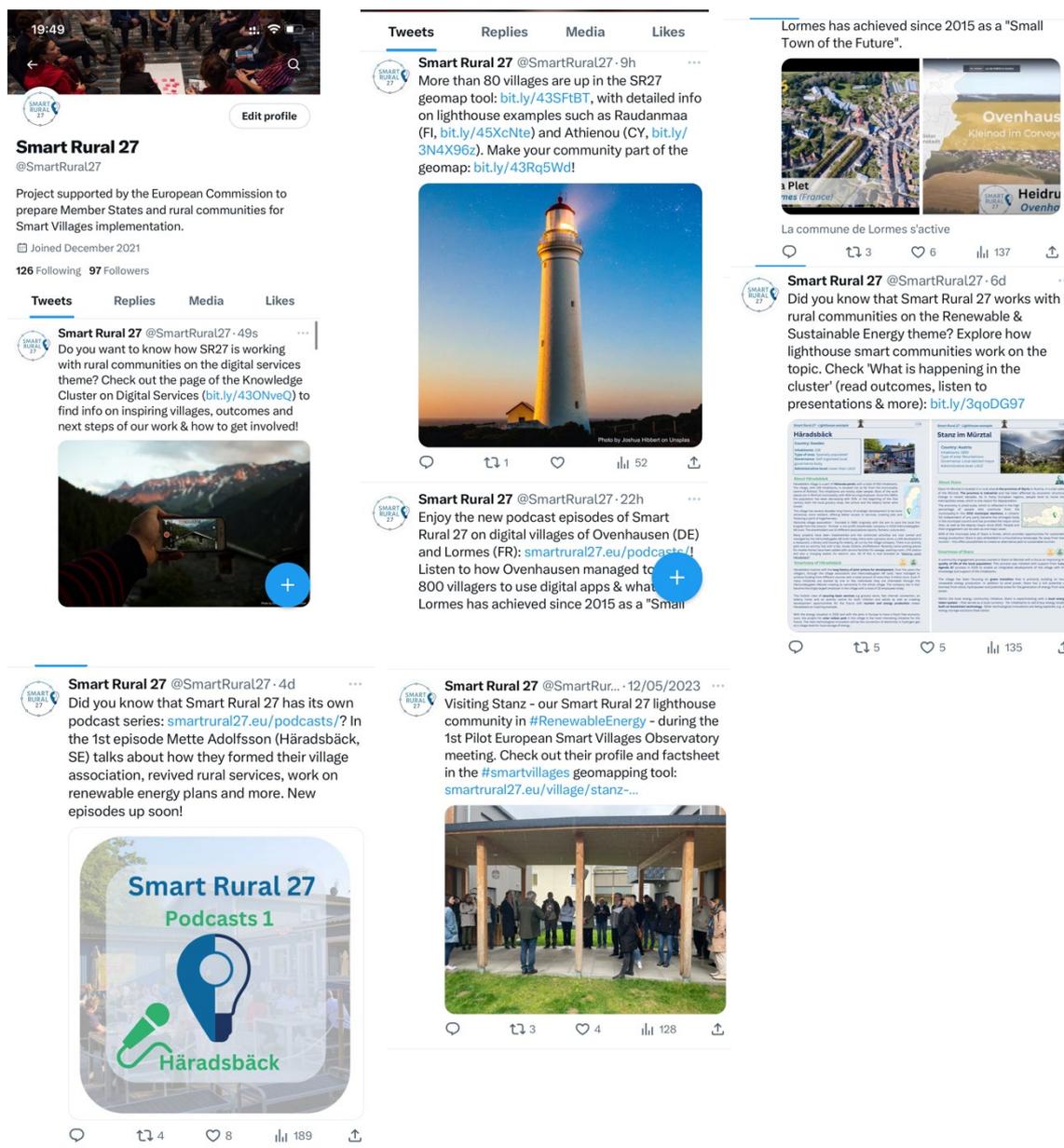
Type: Sparsely Populated Areas

Degree of urbanization: Rural, population of 155

Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/geomapping-tool/>

The approved factsheets have also been promoted through Twitter and Facebook (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 : Lighthouse promotion through social media



Source: Smart Rural 27 Twitter account

iii) Using lighthouse examples in peer-to-peer exchanges

As presented above, the main purpose of lighthouse examples **became to inspire other communities through the smart journey and specific smart actions**. Lighthouse examples have been used in the work of the ‘Knowledge Cluster of Rural Communities’ as practical tools to inspire other villages in direct peer-to-peer exchanges. Among others, presentation videos from lighthouse sites made during knowledge cluster meetings are also available on the Smart Rural 27 YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/@SmartRural27>.



Cross-visits were carried out to selected lighthouse examples to interested communities¹⁵ in the framework of the cluster work. An initial cross-visit took place to Stanz (within the 1st Pilot Smart Villages Observatory event) on 12 May 2023 and Samsø (on 23-24 October 2023). An additional field visit was also organised to Smart Rural 21 village Mukarov¹⁶ in Czechia (in the framework of the 2nd Smart villages Pilot Observatory meeting) on 27-28 November 2023.

iv) Complementing factsheets with creative products

Creative production has been carried out in relation to the approved lighthouses (Stanz, Häradsbäck, Lormes, Ovenhausen and Tomaszyn). **Three episodes of the Smart Rural 27 podcast series** were produced with Häradsbäck, Ovenhausen and Lormes (see: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/podcasts/>) and were promoted through the first Pilot Observatory Newsletter and social media (Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn channels of Smart Rural 27). **A short film was also shared by Häradsbäck** and was sub-titled by the Smart Rural 27 project for wider dissemination (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4areOVE_Ak).

Short (10-min) versions of the two documentary films of Stanz and Tomaszyn presented during the Final Conference of Smart Rural 21 were produced with support of the Smart Rural 27 project and published on the Lighthouse Sites webpage (and YouTube channel) of Smart Rural 27.

2.2.3.2 Lessons learnt from setting up and promoting lighthouse examples (Task 2.3)

The development of lighthouse site examples took longer and has been more demanding than initially expected, mostly due to the challenge of collecting detailed information from communities (including funding sources of initiatives over the past 10 years) and making sure that communities comply with all Smart Villages characteristics. The current format of the factsheets is attractive and useful but was also resource-intensive to develop (which also explains the lower number of examples developed than initially foreseen).

The lighthouse examples' development (data collection) required **close collaboration with national experts and rural communities**, therefore, national experts and community representatives – especially Smart Rural 21 communities that the team had already closely collaborated with - remained the main source of lighthouse identification and lighthouse information provision¹⁷. For instance, several initially identified lighthouse examples were not supported

¹⁵ Instead of the initially planned national taskforce member visits.

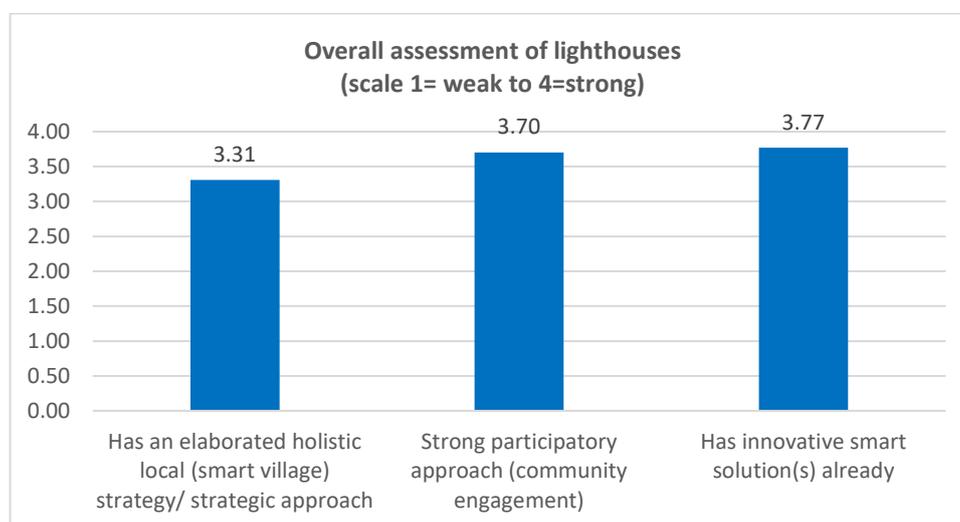
¹⁶ Not a lighthouse example, but Smart Rural 21 smart village.

¹⁷ Taskforces were also set up later than expected (due to the lower interest in taskforce work at the early phases of the project when the CAP Strategic Plans were not yet approved), and therefore, could not be used to their full potential in the identification of lighthouse examples (as initially foreseen).

through EU funds¹⁸, therefore, did not 'qualify' as lighthouse examples under the requirements of the Smart Rural 27 project.

Since **Smart Villages is a relatively new concept**, very few villages have smart village strategies (at best they have local community plans), and consequently EU funding has not directly financed such strategies during the 2014-2022 programming period (or before) even when smart village strategies existed (e.g. in the case of the Smart Rural 21 projects) – although **they might have provided funding for individual smart solutions**. This was also demonstrated through the rating the initially identified (potential) lighthouse examples by national experts on a scale of 1 (weak) to 4 (strong) according to three aspects (see Figure 13).

Figure 13 : Rating of potential lighthouse examples by national experts



Source: Promotional Strategy (Task 2.3)

As presented in the graph, examples **rated lowest according to having an elaborated smart village strategy** (3,31) – one of the main challenges in the identification of smart villages - and strongest on having innovative solutions (3,71) – an aspect that most communities strongly fulfil.

The identification of lighthouse examples reinforced the finding of the Funding Options and the Blueprint Reports, **that EU funding is often not reaching small communities**. In other words, there are many initiatives of rural communities that are innovative and inspiring but not necessarily EU-funded.

It has been recognised that the added value is much higher of developing lighthouse examples that are inspiring for other communities, than focusing on promoting EU financing. **Communities are inspired by the experience of**

¹⁸ Narrowing down the list of examples on the basis of EU funding excluded most of the rural communities initially identified as potential lighthouses (under Activity 2.3.2).



similar communities, including their difficulties and struggles to overcome specific challenges.

The methodological challenges linked to the identification and development of lighthouse examples were trifold:

- 1. Deciding which community is really successful and can be inspiring for others:** Working with the Smart Rural 21 villages has shown that it takes several years of close working to be able to make an assessment on the quality of the village actions and community engagement. Interestingly, being successful in EU financing does not necessarily reflect a successful Smart Villages process. In the Smart Rural 27 project, the Knowledge Cluster approach – i.e. engaging not only presenting the selected examples – has helped to create engagement among communities.
- 2. Deciding how to best use lighthouse examples to inspire others:** The promotion of lighthouse examples gained new (real) meaning with the setting up and animating of the Knowledge Clusters of Rural Communities. Four (out of the initial eight) examples have been developed with the purpose of supporting the work of the two knowledge clusters, whereas four more examples were developed on other themes¹⁹. Lighthouses have been used to trigger interest in the cluster work, at the same time engaging the lighthouse and other communities in peer-to-peer learning.
- 3. Finding the main motivation for potential lighthouses to share their expertise:** It has been important to demonstrate the benefits of sharing information for the communities. Promoting examples at the European level is often no longer a sufficient motivation for rural communities, as they are extremely busy and prefer to invest their time and energy in activities that bring practical (such as concrete technical and financial support for the implementation of smart solutions) benefits²⁰. This has been particularly true as collecting relevant information from communities in this format has been time consuming. The Knowledge Clusters again helped to overcome this challenge. Lighthouse communities who would like to be engaged in the cluster's work are also open to share their experience with others through the factsheets. Engaging in the cluster and being presented as lighthouse example were therefore good incentives.

¹⁹ The initial two lighthouse examples (Stanz and Häradsbäck) were promoted in relation to the Renewable Energy Cluster; and further two examples (Ovenhausen and Lormes) supported the Digital Services Cluster. Other lighthouse examples are being shared through the geomapping tool and promoted through social media (Twitter and Facebook) and other channels (e.g. events such as the European Week of Regions and Cities in October 2023).

²⁰ Also in Smart Rural 27, whenever considerable input was needed on behalf of the village / rural community members financial allocations (expert days) were provided at the village level (i.e. for communities sharing their knowledge).

2.2.4 Monitor and analyse the support for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.4)

2.2.4.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 2.4

The purpose of the analysis of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans was to provide an overview on **how Smart Villages concept has been programmed in the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans** (CAP SPs) across the 27 Member States - see Activity 2.4.2. The analysis was based on the CAP SPs approved by the end of 2022.

Furthermore, the CAP analysis has also provided an overview – as far as the Smart Rural 27 project resources and existing information allow – **on how other EU (especially the Cohesion Policy), national and regional programmes (could) support Smart Villages**, since Smart Villages has been initiated as a multi-funded policy tool.

The synthesis of findings (Activity 2.4.3) aimed to provide information on the specificities of Smart Villages programming, lessons learnt to date and recommendations for the future. The final outcome is a CAP Synthesis Report that is complemented by Member States factsheets in both English and national languages.

Concept Note (Activity 2.4.1)

The initial Concept Note was integrated within the joint Concept Note for Tasks 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4. The note set out the detailed methodology on how the CAP Strategic Plan analysis will be carried out in Member States with support from the national experts, including structured collection of quantitative and qualitative information and then analysis by national experts. The final analysis has closely followed the methodology set out in the concept note.

This analysis of the CAP Strategic Plans has been carried out by Smart Rural 27 national experts in each Member State. Guidance was provided by the Smart Rural 27 project to experts on how to carry out the CAP Analysis, including a CAP analysis template, online form and simplified 'factsheet' template to summarise key findings.

As part of their CAP analysis work, **national experts also prepared interviews with the CAP Managing Authorities** – in all the Member States where the authorities were available for a discussion. In the context of the interviews, the results of the analysis, including the recommendations were shared and discussed with the representatives of the Managing Authorities. The final draft versions of the CAP factsheets were also sent to Managing Authorities for final comments before their publication. The analysis also covered other EU programmes, initiatives and strategic documents developed in various national contexts.



Member State Factsheets (Activity 2.4.2)

For each Member State a **CAP Strategic Plan factsheet has been developed in English and in the national language** and laid out in a more attractive publication format. **The purpose** of the factsheets has been to provide a comprehensive overview as a point of reference for relevant Smart Villages information in the CAP Strategic Plans (and beyond). The factsheets contain:

- **A short introduction**, including definition of Smart Villages and rural areas in the CAP Strategic Plans (and beyond), highlighting how far the digital aspect is relevant in the context of Smart Villages (see Figure 14).
- **An infographic page** that summarises key findings, including interventions supporting Smart Villages, specific objectives that Smart Villages contribute to, the overall budget and values for R.40 target indicator, technical support and other relevant programmes (see Figure 14).
- **A more detailed elaboration of Smart Villages under relevant sections of the CAP SPs** (see Figure 14) including:
 - Strategic Statement;
 - Assessment of needs;
 - Specific objectives;
 - Target plans for R.40;
 - Consistency of the strategy and complementarities;
 - Common elements to several interventions;
 - Interventions;
 - Modernisation: AKIS and digitalisation;
 - Ex-ante evaluation.

Furthermore, there is a section Smart Villages in other programmes (building on both CAP findings and own research/ knowledge of national experts).

Figure 14 : Sample introductory, infographic and detailed contents pages of factsheets

Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic plan Finland

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What are the basic SV components?

DEFINITION OF SMART VILLAGES

There is no national definition. The Finnish CAP Strategic Plan uses the definition provided by the European Pilot Project on Smart Eco-social villages supported by the European Commission (2018): "Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to enhance their sustainability and resilience based on local strengths and opportunities." (FI CAP SP, p. 970-971)

Is there a focus on digital innovation? There is a strong focus on digital innovation. Intervention 07 – 'Smart Village Cooperation' identifies the following needs: "Digitalisation is also in a cutting-edge position in the development of smart villages - although it is not only about that. Smart adaptation brings its own opportunities for development. The intervention broadly meets the goals of the EU's long-term rural vision. The [cross-cutting] themes of the smart village projects are digitalisation and innovations." (FI CAP SP, p. 971)

Is rural area/village defined? The rural area is not defined as such. The definition of the eligible rural area of mainland Finland in business and development projects is based on the use of spatial datasets covering the area. The Finnish Environment Institute maintains a municipal structure monitoring system (YKR). The areas have been divided into seven classes out of which 3 are rural:

- Close-by cities;
- Rural heartland (above criteria and most often primary production agriculture);
- Remote rural areas (often large inhabited areas, forests and swamps).

Is there a reference to smart village strategies? There is no clear reference to smart village strategies. The R.40 indicator mostly includes Smart Village projects (and project plans).

Project funded by the European Commission.
Last updated: 30/04/2024

2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Finland

Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic plan - Finland

Dedicated Smart Villages interventions

✓ Smart Village Collaboration (Cooperation Projects - 07, COOP)

Other relevant interventions

- ✓ LEADER (77-05, COOP)
- ✓ Investments in rural environment development (Inv General Benefit 04, INVEST)

Mostly contributes to...

SQ: Promoting employment, gender equality, including the participation of women in farming, social inclusions and local development in rural areas.

XCO: Cross-cutting objective of modernising the sector by fostering and sharing of knowledge, innovation and digitalisation in agriculture and rural areas, and encouraging their uptake.

Year	Cumulative Number of SV strategies or projects
2024	2
2025	12
2026	27
2027	42
2028	60

Direct financing:
Smart Village Collaboration Projects (Cooperation 07, COOP): 10.000.000 €

Cooperation – Smart Village Projects (strategies)
Estimated 60 projects at average 166 000 € / Smart Village Project (strategy)

Preparation funding
Estimated 10 feasibility studies at 5000€ lumpsum/study.

Technical Support

No specific CAP Network support actions for Smart Villages have been identified in the CAP SP.

Other relevant programmes:

No other directly relevant programmes for Smart Villages have been identified.



Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic plan Finland

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

What are the basic SV components?

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1

Project funded by the European Commission.  Last updated: 30/04/2024

Source: CAP Factsheet sample (<https://www.smartrural27.eu/cap-analysis/>)

Beside the factsheets, **a set of recommendations has been made** by national experts on how Smart Villages planning and implementation could be improved in the Member State, including specific recommendations as well as suggestions on how to improve the linkages between Smart Villages and other relevant interventions and programmes. These recommendations have also been discussed with Managing Authorities (MAs) whenever it was possible in the framework of the MA interviews.

In addition, **two policy lighthouse examples** have been developed by the end of the project on the Smart Villages approaches of two of the most advanced Member States: **Austria and Lithuania**. The policy lighthouse examples aim to provide more in-depth information on the initial Smart Villages implementation experience of the two Member States, and preliminary lessons.

Synthesis Report on Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans (Activity 2.4.3)

A comprehensive report synthesising findings across Member States has been prepared based on the individual Member State analyses. **The purpose** of the 'Support for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans' report is to provide an overview on **how Smart Villages concept has been programmed in the**



2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs) across the 27 Member States (28 CSPs – as there are separate CSPs for Flanders and Wallonia in Belgium).

The report aims to provide information on the specificities of Smart Villages programming, lessons learnt to date and recommendations for the future. It serves as a first reference point for Managing Authorities to improve their own programming and provides information for interested stakeholders on Smart Villages in the CAP and beyond. The report also provides recommendations on future Smart Villages programming.

The qualitative findings of the synthesis report have been enriched with quantitative data and visuals (graphs and figures).

Some of the main findings of the synthesis report can be summarised as follows:

- While an EU definition has been developed in the context of the Pilot Study on Smart Eco-social Villages, this definition has not been binding (and is not included in the CAP Regulation), leaving Member States flexibility to determine and develop their Smart Village definitions. According to the analysis, there is a **formal definition in relation to 15 CAP Strategic Plans** (more than 50%) out of which: 9 indicated that there is an SV definition in the CAP SP and 6 that SV is defined elsewhere.
- **Smart Villages are expected to contribute the most to Specific Objective 8 (SO8):** 'Promote employment, growth, gender equality, including the participation of women in farming, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including the circular bio-economy and sustainable forestry'. Smart Villages are referenced under SO8 in all of the cases (16) when it appears in the Specific Objectives section of the CAP SPs. The second most relevant Specific Objective from a Smart Villages point of view is the Cross-cutting Objective (CCO) on 'Modernising the sector by fostering and sharing knowledge, innovation and digitalisation', referenced in 4 CSPs.
- In the context of CAP Strategic Plans, **the most relevant rural development interventions are cooperation, including LEADER²¹, investments (especially basic services)²² and knowledge with focus on innovation²³.**
- According to the CAP Strategic Plans approved by the end of 2022, **seven (7) Member States planned in their CSPs nine (9) dedicated interventions** – other than LEADER to support Smart Villages, linked to R.40 'smart transition of the rural economy: Number of supported smart-villages strategies': Austria (3 interventions), Finland (1 intervention),

²¹ Article 77, paragraph 1 (b) and (e) of Regulation (EU) 2115/2021.

²² Article 73 of Regulation (EU) 2115/2021.

²³ Article 78 of Regulation (EU) 2115/2021.

Hungary (1 intervention), Italy (1 intervention), Lithuania (1 intervention), Poland (1 intervention), Spain/Galicia (1 intervention). It is estimated that under (other than LEADER) Cooperation interventions up to € 121 160 547 might be spent in total on Smart Villages strategies and projects, out of which € 56 221 454 EU contribution, supporting some 644 cooperation operations/ projects and 580 Smart Village Strategies. Furthermore, under the Investment interventions approximately up to € 72 866 080 might be spent in total on investments related to Smart Villages, out of which € 40 079 490 EU contribution, supporting some 66 investment operations and contributing to 49 Smart Village Strategies.

- **There is direct reference to LEADER support for Smart Villages in 18** (AT, BE-Flanders, BG, CY, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HR, HU, IR, IT, LV, LU, PL, RO, SE, SI) of 28 CAP SPs, out of which in **5 countries** (Austria, Finland, Hungary, Italy and Poland) there are also dedicated interventions on Smart Villages, and **these and the LEADER interventions complement each other**. Available data (financial and number of smart village strategies) on support to Smart Villages from LEADER interventions was still limited at the time of the analysis.
- **There are references to Smart Villages support in the sections on national CAP Networks in 5 CAP SPs:** in Austria, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Ireland and Latvia. These **mostly concern capacity building** with the relevant actors (including LAGs) for developing smart village strategies and implementing smart solutions.
- **Overall 88 programmes supported by other EU, national or regional funds have been identified in the 27 Member States** by national experts that have potential to support Smart Villages. However, a large majority (84%) of the named programmes have been classified as “could potentially support *indirectly*”, others directly support Smart Village-type initiatives (16%).

2.2.4.2 Lessons learnt from monitoring and analysing Smart Villages under the CAP Strategic Plans (Task 2.4)

The Smart Villages analysis in the CAP Strategic Plans (SPs) has been based on **the first approved version (end of 2022) of CAP SPs**. Since there has been a delay in the programming of the CAP SPs, this has also resulted in carrying out the CAP analysis at a quite late stage of the project. Furthermore, the analytical process has been very **resource-intensive**, and required several feedback loops among the Managing Authorities – national experts – Smart Rural 27 core team – European Commission. This has further slowed down the process.

Since the process has been long, some of the findings of the report might become outdated by the time of publishing, partly due to the availability of additional information on the implementation of relevant interventions, partly due

to the amendments made to some of programmes in the meantime (e.g. the number of smart village strategies (R.40) supported by LEADER LAGs defined at a later stage in a number of programmes); and the implementation of the LEADER interventions – that is one of the main instruments for supporting Smart Villages in several Member States – has advanced (including the selection of LEADER LAGs, and approval of Local Development Strategies that contain further reference to the number of smart villages strategies / R.40 indicator). It is important to **improve the process of making such analytical information accessible much quicker in the future** (e.g. in a less formal / working draft format of deliverables), to allow stakeholders to access information that can support their work. During the project, many stakeholders requested the analysis (i.e. analytical reports that are outputs of the Smart Rural 27 project) to be made available as soon as possible and stressed the importance of timely information provision for their work.

Methodologically, it has been challenging to **distinguish direct references to Smart Villages from information that might be indirectly relevant for Smart Villages**. For instance, national experts have identified a wide range of CAP interventions and other initiatives/ programmes that have the potential to support Smart Villages (e.g. digitalisation, climate actions, etc.). Initially, the national experts have collected considerable information on both direct Smart Villages references and information that was indirectly relevant for Smart Villages. However, over time, it has been decided **to focus on direct Smart Villages references only** within the CAP Factsheet to sharpen and make more factual the analysis and make sure that the factsheets clearly focus on Smart Villages aspects and efforts made by relevant Member States. At the same time, references to indirect CAP interventions and other EU, national and regional programmes were included in the Member State-specific recommendations, highlighting the importance of creating synergies between Smart Villages interventions and these.

It is important to note, that while the CAP Strategic Plans have been approved by the end of 2022, **there is still flexibility and scope to refine the plans and adjust them for a more supportive Smart Villages policy framework**. On the one hand, it is possible to make amendments to the CAP SPs in the course of the programming period; on the other hand, there is a lot of scope for adjustments in the publication of the specific calls (eligibility and selection criteria).

It is recommended that the implementation of Smart Villages under the CAP Strategic Plans is **continued to be monitored closely** in the future to draw further lessons in the implementation. Further detailed case studies (such as the policy lighthouse examples of [Austria](#) and [Lithuania](#)) could be developed at a later stage to capture the learning experience from also other countries.



The synthesis report has made seven key recommendations as follows:

1. Continued programming guidance on Smart Villages

The overview of the CAP Strategic Plan analysis shows that there are many **uncertainties around the programming of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans**, such as the lack of definition of what Smart Villages mean in the national context, how far digitalisation should be a focus, what the distinction should be between strategies and projects, how LEADER LAGs can integrate Smart Villages within their strategies and how to implement these. Only few Member States included dedicated Smart Villages interventions in their CAP SPs, most of them included Smart Villages under the LEADER intervention (especially as the two concepts are based on similar principles).

Smart Villages is still a new concept in the context of EU programming and therefore, the 2023-2027 CAP SP and other programme implementation in the context of Smart Villages is still **considered to be an experimental/piloting phase**. This situation highlights the strong **need for further guidance and support** for the Member State and regional levels on how to programme and implement Smart Villages at different levels. It is recommended that the European Commission provides further programming guidance to Member States in relation to Smart Villages within the CAP SP. The guidance should be specific (with clear definitions, requirements and support activities).

2. Capacity-building on the connection of Smart Villages & LEADER

During the current programming period, LEADER is the main intervention through which Smart Villages will be achieved in most of the Member States. However, Member States and regions mostly programmed Smart Villages under LEADER as this seemed to be the safest option, and due to lack of clarity on several aspects of Smart Villages at national level. Most Member States expect LAGs to programme Smart Villages within their Local Development Strategies. Generally, there is **no additional funding provided for Smart Villages implementation for LEADER LAGs** that programme it within their LDSs, although this is an option that could still be considered by Member States.

There are generally many uncertainties among LAGs on how this process should be done, what a smart village strategy is, whether strategies or projects (or both) should be supported, what is considered to be smart and innovative, what kind of animation support can be provided to villages, etc. Most often **there is limited guidance at the Member State level to LAGs** on how to implement Smart Villages. At the same time, some Member States - such as



Estonia (LEADER LAG training programme²⁴) and Ireland (Smart Village training for Local Development Companies²⁵) - were running dedicated support actions on Smart Villages to LAGs. This experience can be built on in the future.

It is recommended that **specific capacity-building activities are designed to create synergies and effective implementation frameworks between LEADER and Smart Villages**. Capacity-building should firstly concern CAP Managing Authorities on how to support LEADER LAGs in implementing Smart Villages. Dedicated capacity-building activities (events) could be organised for MAs on this aspect (e.g. by the European CAP Network). **LEADER LAGs also need capacity-building**. National CAP Networks and national LEADER Networks are ideally placed to provide such support within their activities.

Support for the exchange among Managing Authorities and LAGs **should also come at the European level**. Support can build on the relevant activities of the Smart Rural 27 project, for instance the work of the Smart Rural 27 taskforces that have carried out support activities for LEADER (planned among others in Poland, Hungary and Latvia – to be further discussed and agreed within the relevant taskforces).

3. Supporting local communities

Municipalities (local communities / villages) - defined according to the national context - **should be a clear target of Smart Villages support actions/ interventions**. Villages are defined differently in the various Member States²⁶. While supporting Smart Villages through LEADER is a good starting point, it is important that Member States also consider direct support to local rural communities/ municipalities both in terms of developing their own Smart Village strategies/ concepts and in terms of implementing smart projects.

This is especially **important in the context of mobilising other CAP interventions and financial resources** for the benefit of local communities (including improving services, infrastructure, supporting entrepreneurship, short supply chains / farm-to-fork, bioeconomy, renewable energy, knowledge exchange and innovation, cooperation). Managing Authorities should consider making these interventions more accessible to smart local communities (villages) / municipalities; and combining these interventions for the benefit of rural municipalities. Interventions directly targeted at the local / community level should include both animation/ capacity-building, as well as direct project funding.

²⁴ See more details here: https://www.smartrural21.eu/wp-content/uploads/WS2.2-Kristiina-Tammets_presentation.pdf.

²⁵ See more information here: <https://training.etownz.ie/>.

²⁶ A more detailed elaboration on 'What is a village?' can be found in the Guidebook on How to Become a Smart Village (Smart Rural 21 project – DG AGRI, 2022).

4. Smart village strategies and smart projects

There is a confusion in the current description of Smart Villages interventions on whether they concern smart strategies or smart projects. The two terms are being used in a confusing way in the description, which is likely to result in uncertainties among potential beneficiaries as well (i.e. the expectations in terms of the format and contents of a local strategy vs. project plan might not be clear for beneficiaries unless the expectations are clearly set at the Managing Authority level).

The expectations in the Member States have to be clear in the context of the eligibility and selection criteria of dedicated interventions and calls. It is recommended that support is connected to the development of smart village strategies (or possibly simplified versions of strategies – such as more integrated smart village action plans or concepts like in Poland). At the same time, Member States should not request complex documents and create too many formal procedures for smart village strategies.

At European level, there is a need to set clearer requirements on the smart village strategy, providing guidance on what could be meant by smart village strategies and smart solutions. For instance, the European Commission could consider the development of a dedicated Guidance building on the experience accumulated to date through the Smart Rural projects and beyond. This is required to strengthen and sharpen the definition and the concept of Smart Villages.

The future CAP Regulation and performance monitoring and evaluation guidance (of the current and future programming periods) should also provide clarity on this aspect.

5. The role of CAP Networks

Exchange of experience, sharing of good practices and relevant information have been requested by many local stakeholders. Given the nature of the purpose and type of activities needed for capacity-building, **National CAP Networks are ideally positioned to provide the relevant support,** with the ultimate aim of improving Smart Villages implementation in the CAP. There is limited support specified to date in the CAP SPs for the CAP Networks in relation to Smart Villages, although the potential of providing support has been highlighted by many national experts.

The potential of National & European CAP Networks to provide Smart Villages support needs to be better exploited. Typical network activities include to develop and share good practices on Smart Villages, organise training and events for Smart Villages, facilitate exchange among relevant stakeholders, organise SV competitions and awards, develop research and publications to raise awareness, support for LEADER LAGs. At the European level, the European CAP Network could follow up on the work of the European

Pilot Smart Villages Observatory in the context of capacity-building activities for the national CAP Networks and provide support to Managing Authorities and CAP Networks to better design Smart Village support activities, with particular focus on peer-to-peer learning. The future European CAP Regulation could directly reference Smart Villages support among the activities of the CAP Networks, just like support for LEADER LAGs is highlighted.

6. Smart Villages Platforms

In order to strengthen Smart Villages programming, **dedicated Smart Villages platforms/ networks are needed**. Such platforms have been tested within the Smart Rural 27 project at all levels in the framework of the European Pilot Smart Villages Pilot Observatory. However, it is important to create continuity in this support as the Smart Villages concept needs further strengthening. Political commitment and European-level support is required through further European Commission actions, taking support to the next level.

A cross-fund, pan-European Policy Platform is needed to support Smart Villages, with the active engagement of both CAP and other EU policy stakeholders. Synergies of this network can be created with the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Rural Pact. In particular, the Rural Pact Community and related Community Platforms (including the Smart Villages Platform), could be capitalised on to establish a multi-faceted support and create exchange opportunities on Smart Villages.

7. Smart Villages Funding

The Smart Villages concept was meant to be a multi-funded approach, i.e. to be supported by several programmes and funds. The result of the analysis showed **that no other dedicated programmes or interventions within other EU programmes seem to support directly Smart Villages**. At the same time there are several programmes and measures – including EU, national and regional ones – that provide Smart Village-type support or support in thematic areas that could be highly relevant for Smart Villages.

There is a need for a strong commitment from the European Commission to create a supportive policy framework across multiple funds for small rural communities to help them overcome their ever more pressing challenges through social and technological innovation.

Other EU programmes should be mobilised for the implementation of Smart Villages true to the multi-funded nature of the concept. While the main fund remains the EAFRD and the support framework is provided by the CAP, it is important for the effective implementation of Smart Villages to draw other EU (as well national, regional and private) funds in the support of Smart Villages. This requires more intensive dialogue between DG AGRI and DG REGIO in preparation for the post-2027 programming period; as well as dialogue at the national/ regional level among managing authorities of various

EU and national programmes. Furthermore, various programmes under direct management of the European Commission – such as Horizon Europe – should continue supporting the Smart Villages initiative.

II.3 Work Package 3: Effective stakeholder engagement

Smart Rural 27 aimed to prepare the grounds for setting-up an EU Smart Villages Observatory and establish a strategy on how such observatory could be incorporated into the CAP networking activities with the purpose of:

- **gathering relevant information** about Smart Villages for stakeholders and any other interested parties;
- **increasing the involvement of all stakeholders** in the design and implementation of Smart Village Strategies;
- **accompany rural communities and Member States** in their efforts to rejuvenate rural areas;
- **facilitate peer to peer learning and interaction** among all agricultural and rural stakeholders;
- **foster innovation and support the inclusion of all stakeholders** in the knowledge exchange and knowledge-building process.

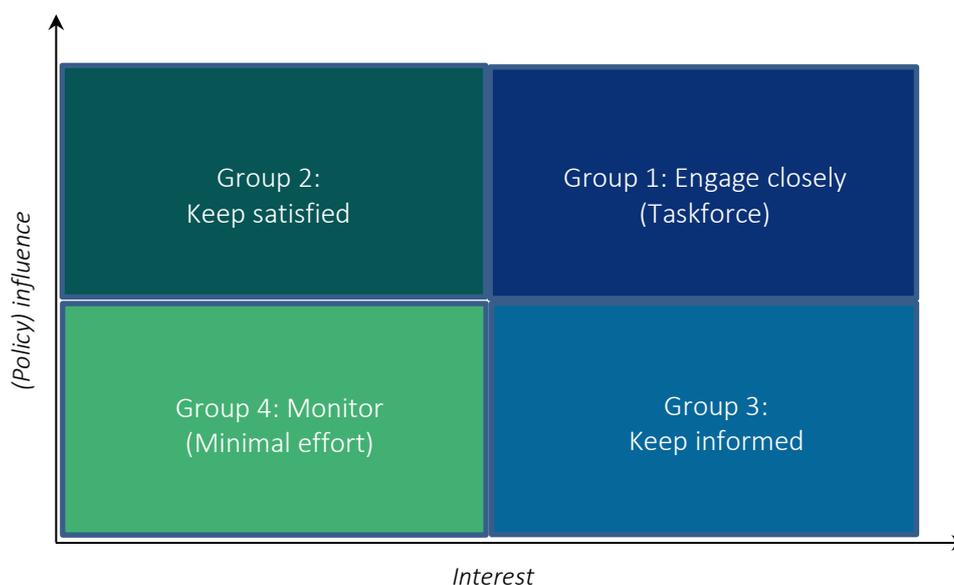
2.3.1 Preparing the ground for setting up an EU Smart Villages Observatory (Task 3.1)

The purpose of Task 3.1 was to prepare the ground for setting up an EU Smart Villages Observatory, through piloting the Observatory approach, and drawing lessons from its implementation.

Activity 3.1.1: Concept Note on Task 3.1

This Concept Note was elaborated during the first phase of the project and aimed to set out the main approach, proposed methodology and tools for piloting a European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory. Among others, the Concept Note specified:

- The **proposed structure / type of stakeholders** (such as policymakers, policy practitioners/ stakeholder organisations, other knowledgeable individuals and organisations, and local rural community representatives) to be engaged. The Concept Note was based on a preliminary mapping of stakeholders with an interest in and influence on Smart Villages in the Member States (using the influence-interest matrix – see Figure 15);

Figure 15 : Influence-interest matrix for stakeholder engagement

Source: Concept Note on the Smart Villages Pilot Observatory (Task 3.1)

- **In terms of its planned operation**, the idea of two of the pillars of the Observatory the (1) national/regional taskforces and (2) stakeholder platforms have already been presented (the concept of the third pillar, knowledge clusters for rural communities, was introduced later based on the identification of needs).
- As it was foreseen that the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory networking activities could be incorporated into the CAP networking activities, therefore, the Concept Note also highlighted the possible linkages between the tasks and objectives of **the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory and those of the EU CAP Network**.
- Furthermore, the Concept Note has also **set out the various methodologies** through which the Pilot Smart Villages Observatory would be operated, including practical action plans (i.e. the action plans of the taskforces published on the Smart Rural 27 website), and regular meetings of the taskforces.

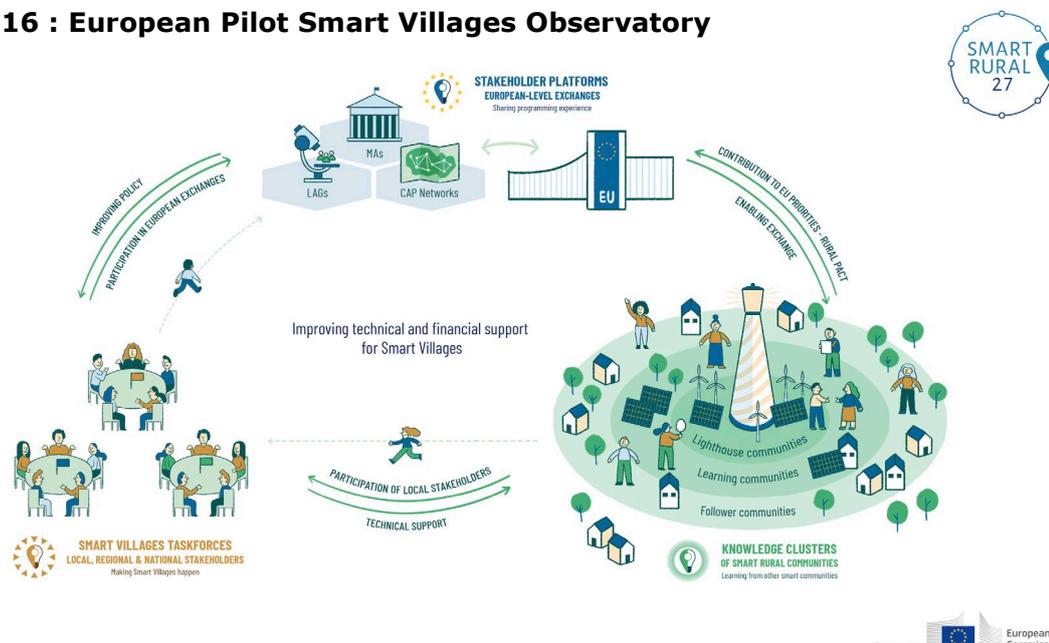
2.3.2 Running the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory

The successful rolling out and implementation of Smart Villages has required the engagement of a wide range of stakeholders (multi-actor) at various (multi-)levels of governance. **Stakeholder engagement was therefore, at the heart of the Smart Rural 27 project.** This has been realised through setting up the **European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory** as a platform to involve, engage and connect relevant stakeholders, including rural communities, for improving the quality of implementation of Smart Village Strategies.

The networking activities of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory has had three main pillars:

- The **Knowledge Clusters of (Smart) Rural Communities** aimed to support exchange of practices and capacity-building among rural communities interested and acting in the same Smart Villages thematic areas, such as renewable energy communities and digital services.
- The **national/ regional Smart Villages Taskforces** aimed to improve policy implementation – especially that of the CAP Strategic Plan rural development interventions but also other relevant Smart Village policies, programmes and measures – through generating practical exchanges among diverse stakeholders (communities, LEADER LAGs, MAs, networks, associations, etc.) within a given Member State or region.
- The **European (Smart Villages) Stakeholder Platforms** aimed to generate exchange on Smart Villages implementation among stakeholders with the same or similar responsibilities across Member States or Europe in order to learn from each other, improve the Smart Villages support framework and draw lessons at the European level. Consequently, Stakeholder Platforms were EU-wide and focused on specific sets of stakeholders, i.e. platform of LEADER LAGs; CAP Managing Authorities, CAP Networks and EU Networks.

Figure 16 : European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory



Source: E40

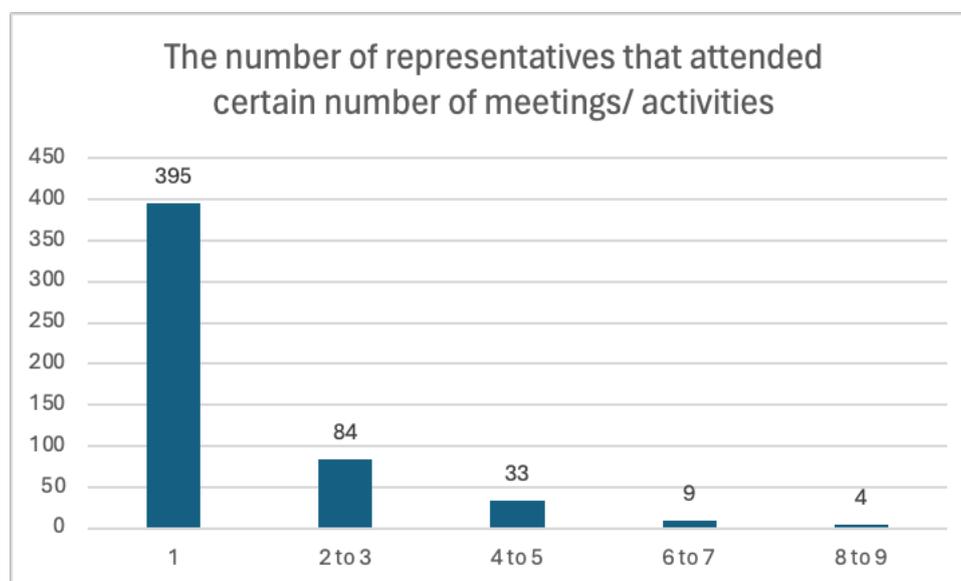
Several meetings and exchanges took place in the context of the various pillars of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory. In the course of the project, **2 knowledge clusters** engaged rural communities from across Europe in meetings, cross-visits and technical support activities; **taskforces**



operated in 11 Member States; and **7 dedicated European stakeholder platform meetings** took place (2 for LEADER, 2 for MAs, 1 for CAP Networks and 2 for European Stakeholder Organisations), as well as **2 face-to-face Pilot Observatory meetings** were organised (in Graz and in Prague) engaging all stakeholder groups. The **Final Conference** was organised in Brussels on 18-19 March 2024 with the registration of more than 150 participants from all types of stakeholder organisations, covering all aspects of the work of the Pilot Smart Villages Observatory and communicating the preliminary results and lessons learnt of the project.

The European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory has not had a formal membership, rather it consisted of a wide range of stakeholders that actively took part in the work of the three pillars. It is **estimated that 525 representatives participated in at least one activity of the pilot observatory** (including the national experts who often represent also other types of rural organisations). Most of these (75%) attended one meeting or activity (e.g. taskforce), however some 22% attended 2 to 5 observatory activities, and some (13 stakeholders) attended more than 5 (up to 9) activities (see Figure 17).

Figure 17: Number of stakeholders attending various Observatory activities



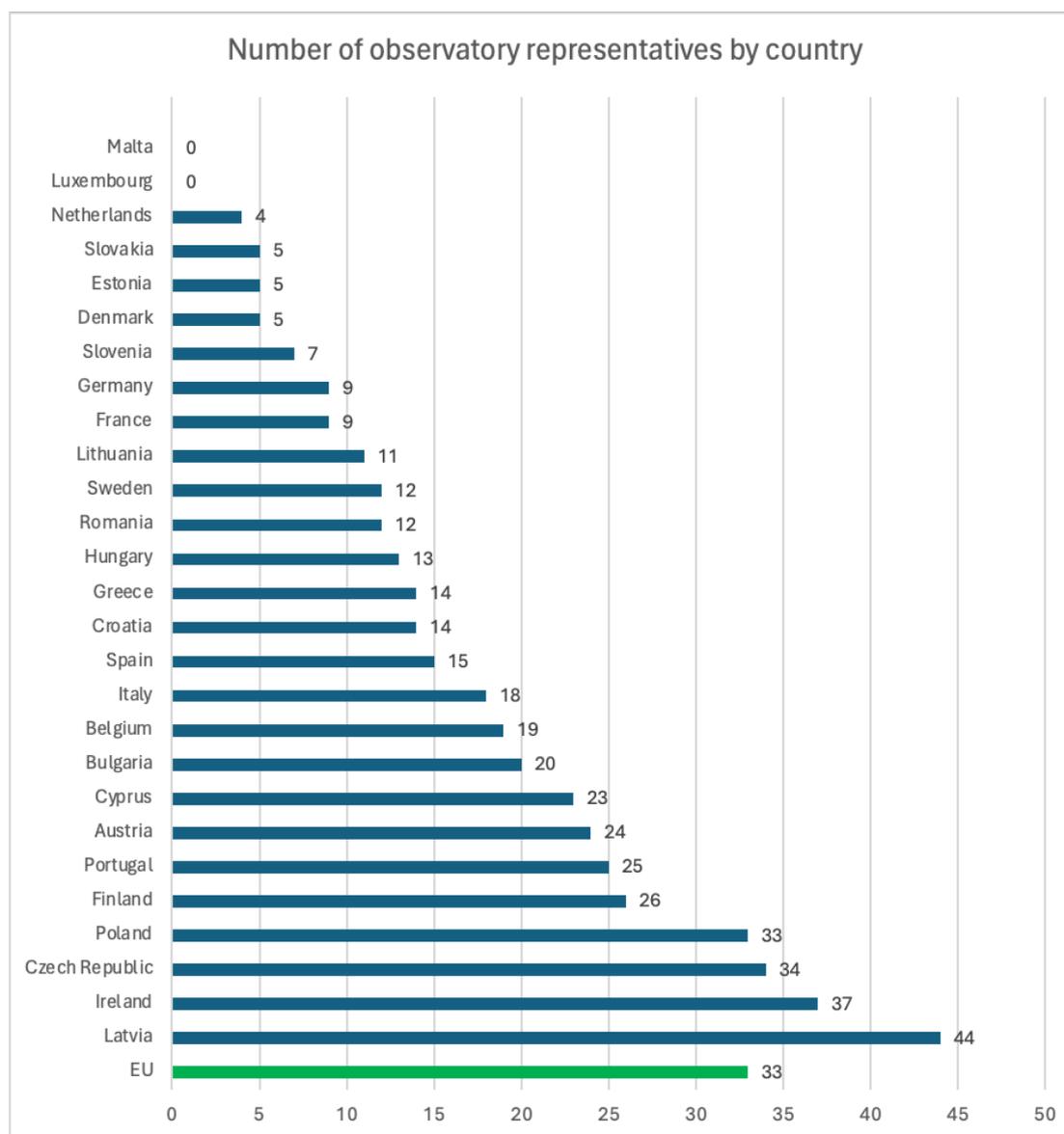
Source: E40 calculation based on participants' lists

The level of involvement by Member State varied widely²⁷. The most active Member States (with over 30 stakeholders being involved in the activities of the observatory) have been Latvia, Ireland, Czech Republic and Poland, followed by Member States where 20 or more representatives have been engaged, such as Finland, Portugal, Austria, Cyprus and Bulgaria. At the other end of the spectrum

²⁷ Based on available data, not including other (non-EU) Member States. There were five (non-EU) participants, four from the UK (including involvement in knowledge clusters and LEADER events) and one from Moldova (joining one of the LEADER meetings).

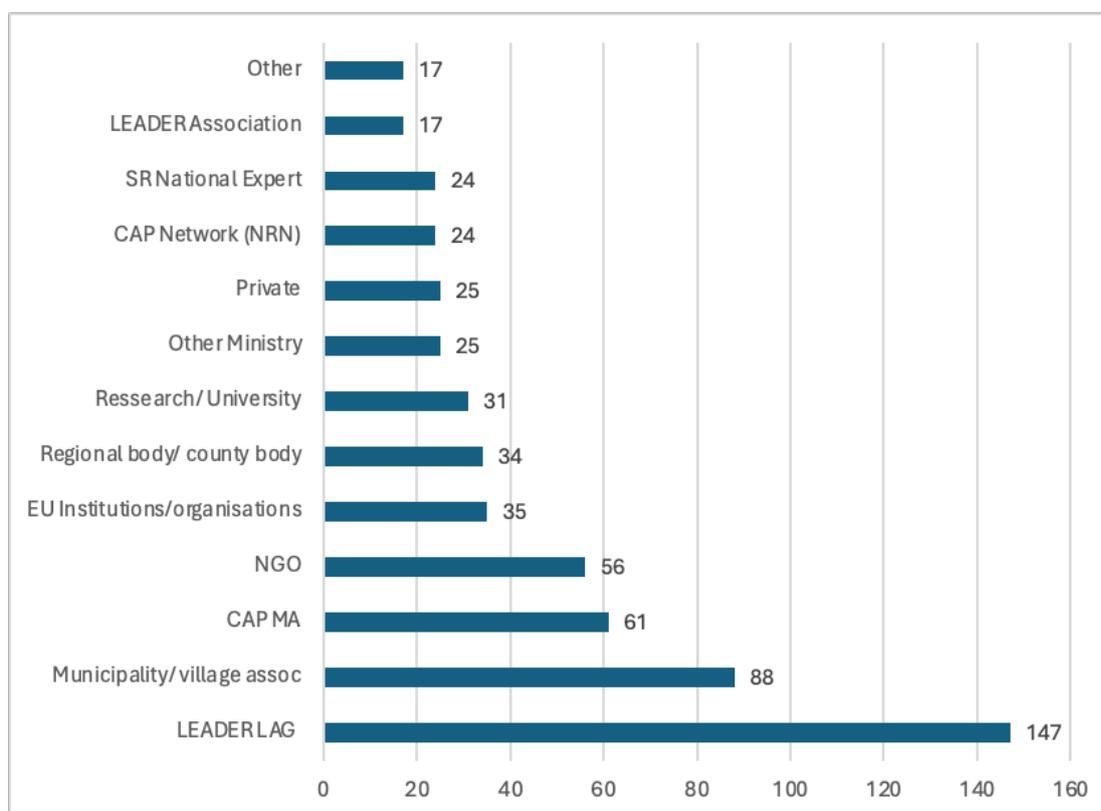
are Malta and Luxembourg where no stakeholders have been participated in the activities of the observatory.

Figure 18: Number of observatory 'members' by Member State



Source: E40 calculation based on participants' lists

The stakeholders in the pilot observatory **represent a diverse set of individuals and organisations** (see Figure 19): The most active group has been **LAGs and municipality/ village representatives**, which demonstrates the bottom-up engagement in the observatory. It has been followed by representatives of CAP Managing Authorities and NGOs and EU institutions/ EU organisations.

Figure 19: Number of observatory 'members' by type of organisation

Source: E40 analysis of observatory data

A final survey launched in May 2024 among all representatives, aimed to assess how useful the various stakeholders have found their participation in the work of the Smart Villages Pilot Observatory. 47 responses have been received from a diverse set of organisations (covering all main target groups of the observatory) from 20 different Member States. On a scale of 1 to 5, respondents on average judged the usefulness of their participation in the Smart Villages Pilot Observatory 4.3 (and the Smart Rural 27 project in general 4.4). The most valued aspects of the observatory's work were **the opportunity to exchange with others, provided relevant information and knowledge and learning about inspiring rural communities and practices**. In the open comments section, several respondents stressed the **importance of the continuation of the work of the observatory and the need for continued support**, including:

"Any continuation of the European SV Observatory - which is highly desirable and necessary - should continue with the approach established in the SR21 and SR27 projects..."

"For sure you have to continue this network and develop it further! There are so many inspiring people and villages around all Europe..."

"I am absolutely convinced that the Smart Villages Observatory should continue in a professional manner with stable funding and a good staff."

"The new European Parliament should continue the support for Smart Villages, in the framework of the EU Rural Pact."

"I think it is critical to continue this work as the Smart villages concept is rolled out, with the need for guidance documents and platforms across jurisdictions for those who are working with Smart Villages for the first time."

"I would like to European Smart Villages Observatory to continue. Exchanging best practices and learning from others is very important."

2.3.2.1 The Knowledge Clusters of Rural Communities

The outcomes of the Smart Rural 21 project showed that there is a strong need to **continue supporting the local rural community level in developing smart village strategies and designing and implementing smart solutions**. One of the key needs expressed by communities during the Final Conference of the Smart Rural 21 project²⁸ was to enable exchange around **common themes of interests** and **build capacity in a very practical way** in the communities both in terms of exchanging and cooperating with others and in terms of identifying and implementing practical smart solutions on the ground. The Pilot Smart Villages Observatory aimed to address this need through testing the so-called **Knowledge Clusters of Rural Communities**. The themes of the knowledge clusters were selected based on the topics highlighted by various rural communities during the Smart Rural 21 Final Conference. Knowledge clusters were launched in an experimental way in two themes of common interest for communities:

- 1.) Renewable energy communities and energy sustainability cluster,
- 2.) Digital services cluster.

A series of activities were planned and successfully completed within the knowledge clusters including:

- **Online meetings / workshops and smart cafés** to assess needs and exchange about practices and experience and to present the approach of selected lighthouse communities;
- **Technical assistance/ advice** to improve the knowledge and tools of participant communities;
- **Participation at the dedicated European Smart Villages Observatory meeting** including dedicated sessions/ field visits to rural communities;
- **Cross-visits for villages / rural communities** to selected lighthouse communities, to gain hands-on experience and knowledge from each other;
- **Promotion of local smart approaches and solutions** at a European level, through lighthouse factsheets, podcasts and videos.

²⁸ "A key conclusion and feedback from the participants suggested that it is very important to continue working directly with the rural communities that would like to become smart villages." (Final Conference Report, p. 18). Source: <https://www.smartrural21.eu/smart-rural-21-project/events/final-conference/>.

The work of the 1st cluster **on renewable energy** consisted of **online meetings and workshops and other technical assistance/ advice** for the member communities of the renewable energy cluster:

- The **1st online meeting** (17/03/2023) was held to introduce the Smart Rural 27 project framework and the role of knowledge cluster within the project to the members. During the meeting two lighthouse communities (Stanz – Austria and Haradsback – Sweden) were also introduced.
- During the **2nd online meeting** (25/04/2023) Søren Hermansen - the key persons behind the Samsø Energy Academy in Denmark - shared his experience in initiating various energy actions with the local community in Samsø.
- The **3rd online meeting** (12/09/2023) of the renewable energy cluster was primarily targeted at cluster members but was also open to other smart rural communities and interested stakeholders. In the session, researcher Andreas Türk discussed how European countries implemented the Renewable Energy Directive (RED) II, highlighting challenges in meeting renewable energy goals. James Roscoe shared insights from the Rural Energy Community Advisory Hub (RECAH), followed by a discussion with participants.
- **Workshops and other technical assistance/ advice** to improve the knowledge and tools of participant communities: In the Renewable Energy Cluster a training session was organised within the field visit to Samsø in cooperation with the Samsø Energy Academy on 23-24 October 2024.

The work of the **2nd cluster on digital services** consisted of **online meetings organised and workshops and other technical assistance/ advice** for the members communities:

- **1st online meeting** (26/04/2023) aimed to introduce the project and knowledge cluster, as well as the lighthouse communities of Lormes (France) and Ovenhausen (Germany).
- The **2nd online meeting** (27/06/2023) focused on the key local/ rural challenges that can be addressed through digitalisation, presented through specific cases Alsunga (Latvia), Newtownmountkennedy (Ireland), Verberöd (Sweden) Mukarov (Czechia), as well as guidance from partner empirica on how to get from idea to practice.
- **In the Digital Knowledge Cluster**, empirica (project partner of Smart Rural 27) provided targeted support to plan digital services within communities based on the needs expressed by cluster members. **A dedicated online meeting (09/11/2023)** was conducted with the aim of identifying the specific support requirements of villages that had previously indicated an interest in receiving tailored assistance for developing digital services as part of their Smart Village initiatives. Initially,

six villages had expressed interest, and four actively participated in the online meeting. Tailor-made support was provided until the end of the project for 2 villages (Oliete and Tricio in Spain).

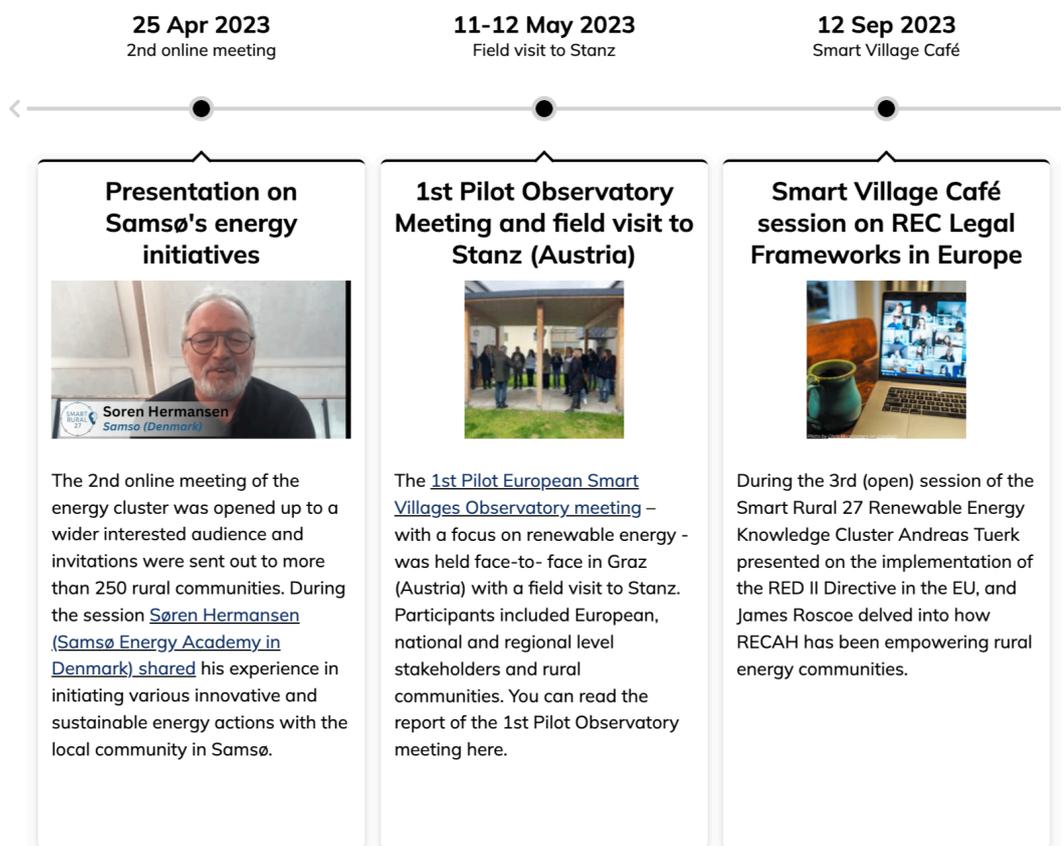
- The **3rd online meeting** (07/05/2024) aimed to conclude of the work of the digital cluster, sharing and discussing the experience from the one-to-one support received from empirica (with presentation from Oliete village).

With the participation of cluster members in the context of both clusters, **cross-visits for rural communities** were organised in the context of the European Smart Villages Observatory meetings to Stanz (Austria) and to Mukarov (Czechia). In addition, a capacity-building visit was organised in Samsø (Denmark) on renewable energy communities.

The clusters' work was further supported by the promotion of local smart approaches and solutions at a European level, including 9 elaborated lighthouse factsheets, 3 short documentary-style films²⁹ and 3 village podcasts. While the lighthouse factsheets all present a holistic approach (in this context they contain a wide range of smart actions and are all relevant for both cluster themes), each factsheet also has a thematic highlight, including renewable energy in Stanz – Austria, Haradsback – Sweden and Samsø - Denmark, and digital services in Lormes – France and Ovenhausen – Germany.

The outcomes of the clusters' work have been shared on the relevant knowledge cluster pages through the clusters' roadmaps (see Figure 20).

²⁹ Two documentaries were directly produced by the Smart Rural 27 project, while the 3rd documentary material was provided by Haradsback (Sweden) to be shared through the Smart Rural 27 project (available in the Geomapping Tool profile of Haradsback).

Figure 20: Sample of the renewable energy cluster roadmap

Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/cluster-on-renewable-energy-communities/>

2.3.2.2 National Taskforces

Smart Villages Taskforces were organised **in regional/ national contexts** in countries where national experts identified interests through stakeholder consultations, to improve the policy and other support framework. National/ regional taskforces were running in 11 Member States: Austria, Belgium-Wallonia (regional), Bulgaria, Czechia, Cyprus, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Poland and Portugal (regional).

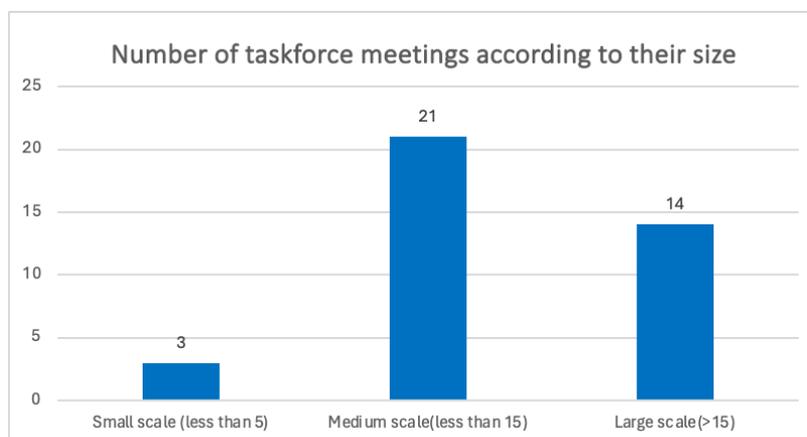
Taskforces have engaged different types of stakeholders depending on the specific policy/ support context (such as improving implementation of Smart Villages through LEADER, adapting the regional approaches/ Integrated Territorial Instrument, engaging other programmes and ministries, such as the Ministry of Information Technology, etc.).

Taskforces have run through a **series of meetings & discussions** between 2022 and 2024 (typically 2-3 meetings per year) to assess the situation and plan specific actions together. **Overall, 38 meetings were organised in the context of the 11 taskforces with some 460 participations**³⁰. The meetings varied in terms

³⁰ This is not equal to the number of participants, i.e. if the same person participated in 2 events this is counted as 2 participations.

of size (number of taskforce members engaged) from small scale (less than 5 persons) to larger scale (more than 15 persons) – see Figure 21 below. Most meetings had more than 5 but less than 15 participants.

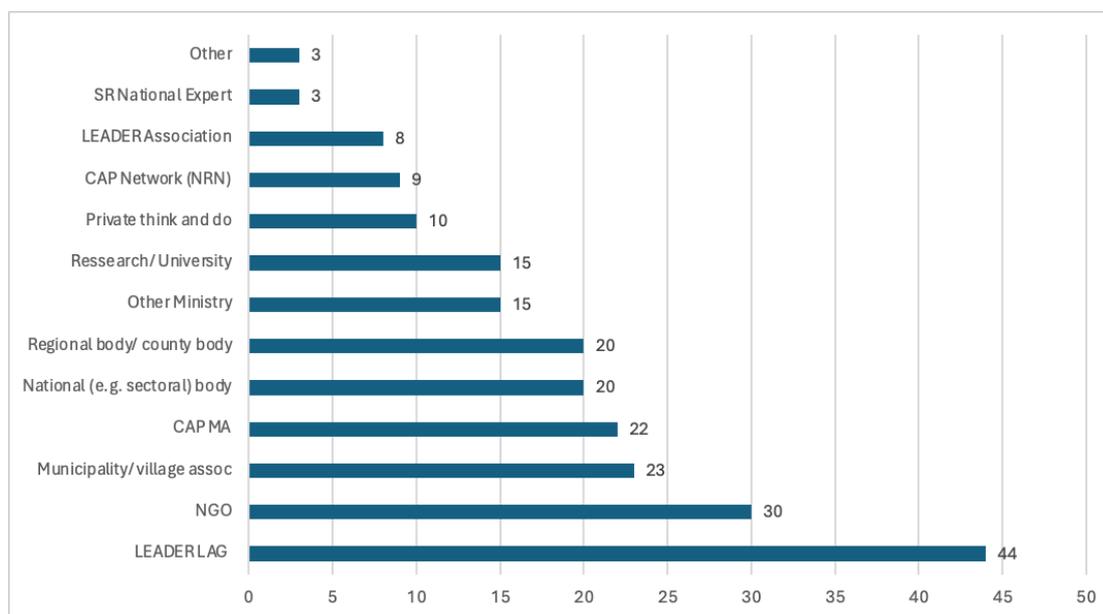
Figure 21 : Type of taskforce meetings in terms of size



Source: E40 own data collection

More than 180 representatives participated in the taskforces across the 11 countries. The set of stakeholders engaged have been diverse (see Figure 22)³¹. LEADER LAGs and NGOs were the most highly represented type of members in the taskforce, followed by municipality/ village representatives and CAP MAs.

Figure 22 : Taskforce members by type of organisation



Source: E40 analysis

³¹ The number is indicative (as the indication of type of organisation might not be fully precise/ consistent across countries). The sum of type organisations does not add up to the actual membership, as individual members might belong to more than one type of organisation.

The work of the taskforces has often been complemented by **additional events and/or analytical work** carried out by the Smart Rural 27 team (see Table 4), including the development of surveys, guidance and training material. As far as events are concerned, it is estimated that the complementary events resulted in more than 700 additional 'participations'³².

Table 4: Complementary activities of taskforces

MS	Additional Smart Villages events
Austria	Styria acted as a regional branch of the Taskforce. A workshop for LAGs and Regional management bodies within Styria (24/05/2023) aimed to help participants to better understand the added value of Smart Villages and how to implement the concept, with focus on village centre development approach.
Bulgaria	A series of meetings were organised (between June and Sept 2022) for LEADER/CLLD stakeholders to raise awareness on Smart Villages and build capacity for its implementation, organised jointly by the National Rural Network and the LEADER Network. Four meetings were also organised in collaboration with the NRN on Smart Villages, two NRN meetings and two Thematic Group meetings. Furthermore a series of smart café sessions on Smart Villages were mostly targeted at local stakeholders.
Cyprus	The cycle of five (5) Regional Information Meetings for the 'Implementation of the Smart Rural Areas Approach' was completed between 27/03/2023 and 05/04/2023 in the Communities of Galata, Skarinou, Trimiklini, Liopetri and Tsada, covering all the Provinces of Cyprus and its rural areas. The meeting was organised by the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation & Digital Policy, with the support of the Cyprus Communities Union and the Smart Rural 27 national expert, discussing opportunities arising from the development of the National Strategic Framework for "Smart Cyprus".
Finland	The Taskforce organised together with the National Support Unit a Webinar on Energy Efficient Communities on actual legislation and future plans (28/11/2022). The event also promoted the technical assistance call by the Rural Energy Hub for emerging or existing Energy communities. The second webinar (26/05/2023) was about the Digital Transition for rural citizens. Transition issues were presented and discussed through case studies and keynote speeches on artificial intelligence and local government roles.
Hungary	A capacity-building event was held on 11/07/2023 for LEADER LAGs to raise their awareness about the Smart Villages approach and activities & lessons of the Smart Rural projects, as well as to provide practical guidance on how to integrate Smart Villages in the LDSs and how to support smart projects.
Latvia	Capacity-building events for LAGs were held on 10/11/2023 and 25/04/2024 with the aim of building a shared vision; and clarify the role of LAGs in the development of Smart Villages, including challenges and necessary support.
Portugal	Presentation and discussion with the Portuguese LAGs took place on 28/06/2023 on the possible integration of support for Smart Village strategies within the Local Development Strategies. A further capacity-building event was held on 12/07/2023 for LAG Ribatejo Norte, for LAG representatives and local municipalities, businesses, associations, agricultural and tourism companies and research.

³² This is not equal to the number of participants, i.e. if the same person participated in 2 events this is counted as 2 participations.

Additional Smart Villages analysis	
Austria	After the pilot analysis of 16 Styrian LEADER local development strategies, the national expert conducted the analysis on how the other 67 LEADER LAGs dealt with Smart Villages in their LDS. In the 3rd taskforce meeting the national expert gave an overview of the outcomes of this analysis. It was clear for all participants, that Smart Villages initiatives need a strategic basis, but that the LDS as such might be an adequate substitute (especially when Smart Villages are implemented as inter-municipal cooperation on a larger scale). During the discussion it became also clear, that additional support could help unveil the potential of digitalisation.
Finland	The Finnish Taskforce carried out a survey on 'Smart Villages: Now and in the Future, with the objective to get the views and opinions of LEADER LAGs and regional village NGOs on smart local development. The survey was sent out to 53 LEADER LAGs and 19 regional village NGOs, with a 40% response rate. The survey report covers questions the level and type of activity and potential roles of villages, issues on digital transition and how villages could use Smart Villages.
Ireland	The taskforce conducted a survey among its members to collect insights and feedback on key aspects deemed significant on Smart Villages at the outset. This survey facilitated the gathering of members' perspectives on defining 'Smart Villages' in Ireland, assessing the impact of each objective on Smart Village development, and shaping the future structure and management of the taskforce. The results from the survey helped compile a draft report shared with the relevant stakeholders.
Poland	The Guidebook on Smart Villages for LEADER LAGs and other local stakeholders has been developed to understand and raise awareness about the Smart village concept and its implementation. It is mostly based on previous knowledge accumulated on Smart Villages in Poland (including desk research, case studies, individual and in-depth interviews) as well as the outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 taskforce. The Guidebook is developed in Polish language and is validated with selected LEADER LAGs in the framework of the Polish Smart Villages Taskforce.
Portugal	A background document was prepared in Portuguese providing additional information about the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 Projects, the definition and description of the Smart Villages concept and approach. A 'Proposal for the Conceptual Framework of P09. Villages - Network of Thematic Villages in Pinhal Interior' was also developed with the aim of considering a more holistic / an integrated approach and taking aboard the Smart Villages concept and exploring potential links with the other funding sources (e.g. CAP Strategic Plan). Concluding the Taskforce activities a 'Territorial Agenda Smart Villages in Pinhal Interior' was developed to be the basis of future development of Smart Villages in the region.

Source: E40, information by national experts

Taskforce Action Plans and key outcomes (including events agenda, reports, analysis, etc.) were posted on the taskforce pages of the relevant countries on the Smart Rural 27 website³³ under specific taskforce roadmaps.

³³ <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/>.

Figure 23: Example of a taskforce roadmap

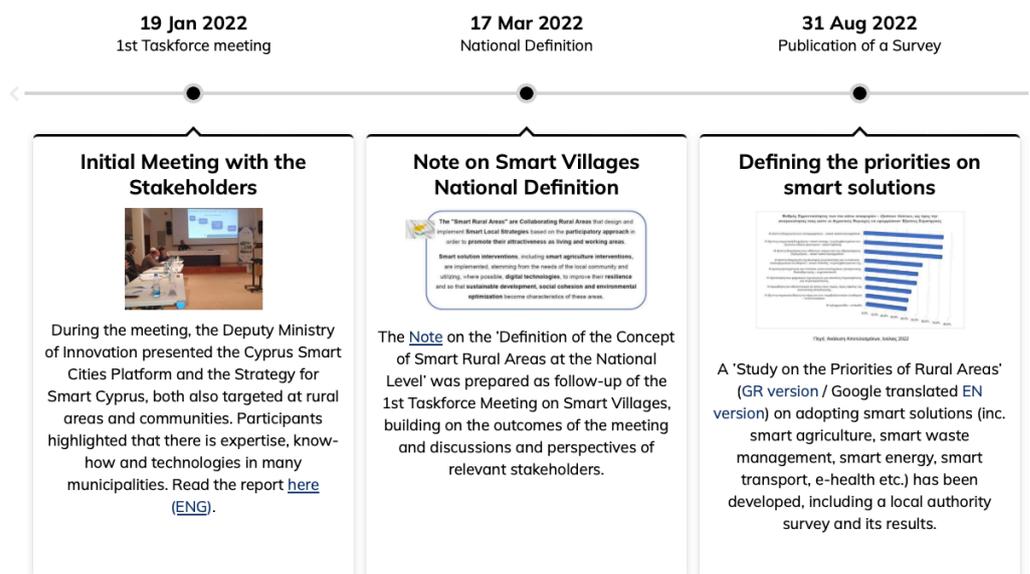
National Smart Villages Taskforce in Cyprus

In Cyprus, the Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy is already supporting scientific research, investing in innovative entrepreneurship, implementing a digital transformation reform, and **designing the “Smart Cyprus Platform”**. The Deputy Ministry is expected to take ownership of the Smart Villages Policy, supported through the CAP Managing Authority. The Taskforce was expected to suggest specific CAP policy interventions, securing that duplications are avoided. The Taskforce was built in a way that most of the relevant interventions and funding schemes are represented.

Read the taskforce Action plan [here](#)

Read more about SV policies in Cyprus [here](#)

Check the summary poster of the taskforce activities [here](#)



Source: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/>.

Taskforce members were also a priority target group for the European Smart Villages Observatory (face-to-face) events.

2.3.2.3 European Stakeholder Platforms

European Stakeholder Platforms were organised at the European level for specific groups of Smart Villages stakeholders: LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs), CAP Managing Authorities and CAP Networks to allow exchange of practical programming experience among them, as follows:

- **1st LEADER stakeholder platform** meeting was held on 28/06/23 and aimed to bring together LEADER stakeholders from all levels to discuss how LEADER can support Smart Villages and how Smart Rural 27 project can support LEADER actors in these efforts. The session was open also to local rural communities, LEADER enthusiasts and other stakeholders and organisations interested in Smart Village support through LEADER. **The 2nd LEADER stakeholder platform** meeting was held on 28/02/2024 with the purpose to provide an update on the state-of-play of the CAP Strategic Plan analysis on Smart Villages under LEADER intervention carried out by the project, as well

as to discuss and plan for the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference (held on 18-19 March 2024 in Brussels). The main target groups of this session were LEADER LAGs and LEADER associations (out of 102, 39 participants representing LAGs and 6 representing LEADER associations during the 1st LEADER Platform meeting, and the respective numbers for the 2nd LEADER meeting is 32 LAGs and 3 LEADER association participants out of 56 participants of the whole meeting). Beside LEADER stakeholders, CAP Managing Authorities (15 and 6 representatives of the 1st and 2nd LEADER meetings respectively) and CAP Networks (6 and 1 representatives respectively) were also important target groups of the meetings.

- **1st MA stakeholder platform** meeting took place on 20/10/2023 with the purpose of launching the Platform for MAs and to discuss how Smart Villages are supported through the CAP Strategic Plans. Examples of Smart Villages interventions were presented and discussed from more advanced Member States on planning Smart Villages support and implementation. **The 2nd MA platform meeting** took place on 15/02/2024 with the purpose of providing an update on the state-of play of the CAP Strategic Plan analysis on Smart Villages carried out by the project, as well as to discuss and plan for the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference (to be held on 18-19 March 2024 in Brussels). 30 and 17 participants took part in the 1st and 2nd MA platform meetings, out of which 18 and 12 CAP MA representatives respectively (others were mostly from the European Commission / country desk officers and SR27 national experts).
- **The national CAP Networks meeting** took place on 07/02/2024 with the purpose of presenting the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects and the tools developed that CAP Networks can also use in their support activities; understand the state-of-play of CAP Network support for Smart Villages and jointly plan the relevant session of the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference (to be held on 18-19/03/24 in Brussels). 17 participants joined the meeting out of which 12 CAP Network representatives.
- **The 1st meeting for European stakeholder organisations and networks** took place on 27/02/2024 with the purpose of informing European stakeholder organisations and networks about the outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 project and planning of the Final Conference (18-19 March 2024 in Brussels) and to discuss possible synergies. 7 organisations joined the meeting including SMARTA-NET, JRC and European Commission representatives. A **2nd meeting** took place on 06/05/2024 with the aim to inform the participants about the final outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 project and final event and discuss the Smart Villages dimension of the work of EU organisations and institutions and the next steps in the Smart Villages support.
- Finally, **dedicated workshop sessions for these platforms** were also organised within the 1st and 2nd Observatory meetings (see above), as well as during the Final Conference (Day 2 workshops).



2.3.3 Lessons learnt through the operation of the Pilot Smart Villages Observatory

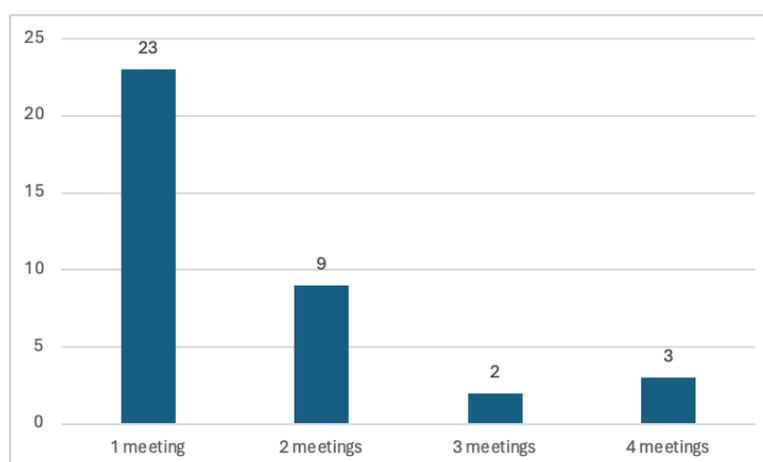
2.3.3.1 Lessons learnt from the Knowledge Clusters of Rural Communities

Throughout the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 project there **has been a strong need from rural community representatives to work on the Smart Village approach** and exchange experience in an international context. This need has been expressed at various meetings as well as reflected in the rate of participation of rural communities in various activities. The Knowledge Clusters of Rural Communities aimed to address this need.

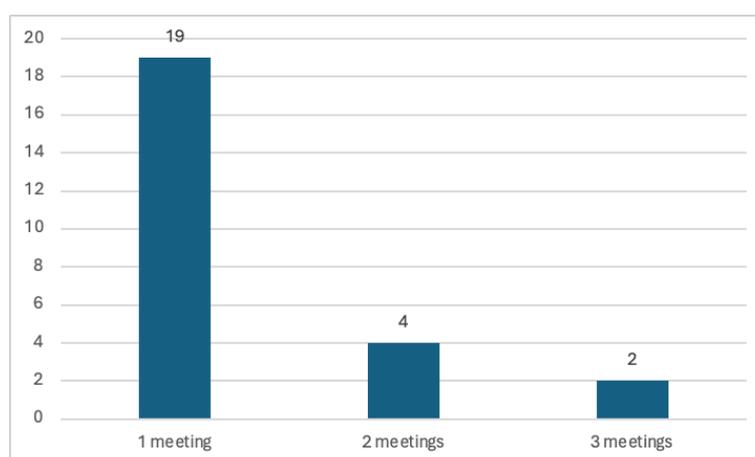
At the start of the process, it was conceived that rural community representatives will be engaged at different levels (from lighthouse, through learning to follower communities), however, at **later stages the distinction was no longer as relevant** as initially thought, with the exception of lighthouse examples that featured strongly in various knowledge cluster exchanges so that others can learn from. Distinction between learning and follower communities was not that straightforward (rather some communities participated more actively in the exchanges than others).

The renewable energy cluster had 3 online meetings, as well as the Samsø fieldvisit and the 1st Pilot Observatory meeting with a focus on renewable energy. In total, 51 representatives participated in at least one knowledge cluster activities, out of which **37 members** represent local communities and/or LAGs. The participation of cluster members varied widely. 23 rural community representatives attended one meeting and 14 at least two meetings. The latter group can be considered as the more active members of the cluster.

The **digital services cluster had no dedicated cross-visit** but more focus on one-to-one support to communities. Out of the **25 rural community / LAG members** (who participated at least at one meeting), most communities (19) attended 1 meeting only and 6 communities at 2 meetings.

Figure 24: Level of engagement in the renewable energy cluster

Source: E40's calculation based on participants' data

Figure 25: Level of engagement in the digital services cluster

Source: E40's calculation based on participants' data

Overall, **a relatively high number of communities (62 communities**, out of which 11 participating at both the renewable energy and digital service clusters) **were engaged** in the clusters' work. However, many of the rural community representatives participated at one meeting only. This is most likely due to the lack of capacity of communities to engage in such a process on a voluntary basis.

The incentives to participate were generally much lower than in the Smart Rural 21 project, as the Smart Rural 27 project did not have a focus on providing tailor-made technical support to rural communities, neither the resources to financially support smart solutions. The digital cluster experimented with providing one-to-one support to interested rural communities to decide how far their planned digital services are feasible in the local development context, through community-engagement. However, while guidance and methods were offered by partner *empirica* for this work, it mostly has required fairly clear ideas on the planned digital services and investment of efforts on behalf of the participant villages. As a result, only 2 villages engaged in the technical assistance with relatively limited efforts invested in the process.



The overall lesson is that – without the dedicated financial or technical support - **it is possible to engage communities in lighter (knowledge provision) activities/ meetings** (aiming to exchange examples and information), **but more challenging to engage them in concrete actions towards implementing new smart solutions** in their community, which is a longer term process with more complex support needs.

The face-to-face/ cross-visits were still the most engaging and practical forms of support that Smart Rural 27 – similarly to Smart Rural 21 – could provide. Field visits organised back-to-back within the Pilot Observatory meetings (Austria and Czechia) and the Samsø (Denmark) triggered good interest among communities and feedback has been positive: 12 out of 12 – 100% and 7 out of 7 – 100% of respondents rating the field visits to Stanz (Austria) and Samsø (Denmark) very useful (4 on a scale of 1 to 4), and 3 out of 4 respondents (75%) rating the Mukarov visit very useful. The interactive marketplace session – where **lighthouse rural communities** presented themselves – was also the most highly rated session of the final event (77% rating the session 5 out of 5).

2.3.3.2 Lessons learnt from the work of National Taskforces

The activities carried out by national taskforces have been **diverse and adapted to the specific needs of each country context**, however, some overall lessons apply.

Taskforces have been useful platforms to bring together a **diverse set of stakeholders to help to come to a common understanding about the concept and implementation of Smart Villages**. Taskforces have been set up in countries where needs were identified (i.e. not all Member States). Other Member States can draw lessons from these when building future similar activities.

Starting up taskforces has not always been easy. Initial delays occurred due to the late adoption of CAP Strategic Plan Regulation and the timing of the Smart Rural 27 project: taskforces could no longer influence the design of CSPs neither could focus on implementation issues until the formal launch of the CSPs (clarity on the framework of support at national level) for Smart Villages. Due to the novelty of the Smart Villages concept, there have been many uncertainties around the actual implementation, and at the same time a lack of interest in several countries to set up a taskforce (especially when Smart Villages have been programmed through LEADER – i.e. Local Development Strategies have not been selected at the time - or where Smart Villages has not been programmed at all in CSPs).

The launch dates and duration of taskforces varied widely (some starting their missions by the end of 2021/early 2022 and finishing in 2023, e.g. Wallonia), whereas at the other extreme the Irish taskforce started its activities only at the end of 2023. **The project has allowed a lot of flexibility in this regard** adapting to the changing national environments and interests expressed (i.e. also

allowed the late start of the taskforce work). Also taskforces have been largely evolving over time, shifting their focus to new subjects of interest (especially towards defining the concept/ themes towards supporting implementation under LEADER, e.g. in Portugal and Latvia).

The initial focus of many taskforces has been to come to a **common understanding concerning Smart Villages**, which has been a common starting point due to the novelty of the concept. Several taskforces (e.g. Austria, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Portugal) focused on supporting Smart Villages **implementation under LEADER** (in the forms of exchange and capacity-building), whereas others also had a focus on **specific smart themes and how to support the emergence of smart solutions**, such as renewable energy and digital services (e.g. in Austria, Czechia, Cyprus and Finland). These are likely to be key focus areas of future similar exchanges as well.

While there have been synergies with the core project activities (e.g. presentation of specific outcomes at the taskforces), **the taskforces could not systematically contribute to the various core activities**, mostly due to the fact that the timing of activities varied largely and the dynamics of taskforces often did not match that of the central project tasks.

The national CAP Networks have been active participants of many taskforces (e.g. Austria, Belgium-Wallonia, Finland, Latvia and Poland) and might be best placed to continue or start up similar multi-actor activities in the future. It is expected that taskforce activities will continue in some countries (e.g. Poland and Finland) through the support of the national CAP Networks.

2.3.3.3 Lessons learnt through the European Stakeholder Platforms

As specified before, the idea behind the European Stakeholder Platforms was to create the opportunity for **stakeholders with the same role/ responsibilities** to initiate exchanges about – and hence improve - their practices on Smart Villages implementation. Platforms, that started earlier and had the opportunity to have two meetings (MAs and LEADER stakeholders) could advance slightly more than those that had one meeting (CAP Networks and EU stakeholder organisations).

The platform meetings reflected the advancement of Smart Villages programming: While during the first meetings the focus has been on mapping the state-of-play; more specific cases could be featured (e.g. during the MA and LEADER meetings) during the 2nd meetings. This approach – i.e. further exchanges parallel to the progress made in Smart Villages implementation – could be followed up further in future EU exchanges. Smart Villages is still an experimental intervention – whether implemented through CAP dedicated interventions or through LEADER – and therefore, following closely and creating the opportunity for stakeholders to exchange about the design, implementation and evaluation of Smart Villages dedicated interventions (and LEADER) remains important.

As the national CAP Networks became operational, **exchanges among national CAP Network support units also have become relevant.** The national CAP Networks meeting demonstrated that some of the networks carried out relevant Smart Villages support already during the previous programming period (such as the Smart Villages competition in Finland and Poland). There are also ongoing network support activities for Smart Villages, such as those presented at the meeting by Austria (open innovation platform, Smart Villages Lab) and Finland (Smart Village Cafés and communication tools). Other CAP Network support units are still in the process of planning and exploring activities to support Smart Villages. Similarly to the Smart Villages implementation logic under **the CSPs the focus of CAP Network activities has also been shifting:** While past activities mostly included communication and awareness raising on Smart Villages, by time, the emphasis has shifted towards capacity-building and improving the implementation of Smart Villages under the CAP. **Exchanges among CAP Networks continues to be relevant** to learn about inspiring ways of supporting the emergence of Smart Villages.

During the meeting with EU stakeholder organisations and networks, the synergies between Smart Rural projects and the work of EU institutions (e.g. the work of JRC and the Rural Pact) and other relevant EU(-funded) projects (such as SMARTA-NET and Horizon project SMART ERA) were highlighted. These organisations **run several support mechanisms** (various activities for rural communities including relevant tools) **that are also beneficial for (smart) rural communities.** Synergies could be built in the long run between the concept of Smart Villages and the work of various EU organisations. In the future it is important to continue engaging with relevant EU Smart Villages initiatives and projects, such as Horizon projects linked to Smart Villages (SMART ERA, RURACTIVE and AURORAL), European networks and platforms such as the European Startup Village Forum and the European Smart Village Network and other relevant EU-wide initiatives and networks (such as ELARD and Euromontana).

Overall, it is important to continue the exchanges on Smart Villages and sharing specific experience as the implementation of Smart Villages is progressing. Furthermore, there is a strong **need to engage representatives of other funds/ EU programmes (especially of Cohesion Policy) more intensively** at all levels (EU, national as well as regional). An EU Stakeholder Platform for other funds have not been possible due to the low level of engagement of relevant stakeholders, however, such platform needs to be considered in the future (as also recommended by the Rural Pact). For instance, during the High-level policy forum in Spain, Elisa Ferreira (Commissioner for Cohesion and Reforms, European Commission) emphasised that Cohesion Policy, in synergy with the CAP, empowers rural areas, especially the least developed regions. This policy extends beyond funding, acting as a powerful developmental tool, supporting local strategies through CLLD and a strong territorial approach, much needed to tackle challenges such as depopulation, job loss, and services. During the event it was also stressed

that “more EU funding for rural areas needs to support a holistic, multi-sectoral approach to rural development. Clear, simplified, and consistent rules are needed for rural stakeholders to access EU funds effectively”.³⁴

2.3.3.4 Activity 3.1.2: Report on setting up a future EU Smart Villages Observatory

A report was prepared towards the end of the project with the aim to clearly highlight and summarise the different tools and activities that the European Smart Villages Observatory will have to cover to become effective within the context of the European CAP Network, including a roadmap with the different steps to be undertaken to setting-up an EU Smart Villages observatory successfully.

A report developed has been much more detailed and comprehensive than initially foreseen by the Technical Specifications. It did not only provide a roadmap and different steps to be undertaken to set up an EU Smart Villages Observatory, but also provided a detailed analysis of the activities of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, together with lessons learnt and recommendations.

2.3.4 Providing a strategy and content for outreach and communication purposes (Task 3.2)

2.3.4.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 3.2

Concept note on Communication & Outreach strategy(Activity 3.2.1)

The Concept Note on the Communication Strategy aimed to specify methods and tools for developing effective communication towards a diverse set of European Smart Villages Observatory stakeholders.

The Communication Strategy’s Concept Note specified:

- The key target groups of the Smart Rural 27 project (For whom?);
- The main messages, information and material to be disseminated and communicated (What?);
- The most suitable methods, tools and channels to reach these target groups (How?).

Communication product	Main communication messages	Key target groups
Webportal: SV Policy (including country pages)	Knowledge on what’s happening in various countries and at the European level in terms of Smart Villages policy developments	Any stakeholder with an interest in finding out more about Smart Villages in national and European contexts
Webportal: European Observatory	Who the key actors actively working with the Smart Village concept are in the national context & at the European level	Help identifying SV contacts for any stakeholder in the given country

³⁴ Source: <https://rural-vision.europa.eu/events/shaping-future-rural-areas-2023-09-27-en>). Furthermore, the Rural Pact aims to enable exchange among stakeholders, including through the Community Platforms.

Social media: Twitter & FB	Short updates about the activities & outcomes of exchanges	Raising awareness among interested (mostly institutional stakeholders) about Smart Villages and the contribution of the SR27 project
GROOP	Take action & make policies happen in practical terms – not just at the level of discussion. Engagement of multi-actor stakeholder groups is key.	Policymakers or policy practitioners with an impact on the policymaking process

The main channels for communication with key target groups have been defined, especially the webportal (to include both policy-related information and information on the pilot observatory), social media (Twitter and Facebook) and meetings/ events. Furthermore, the use of a dedicated online communication platform (Groop) was also foreseen.

Communication Strategy, including website & its updates (Activity 3.2.2 & 3.2.3)

Communication Strategy

The main purpose of the **Communications Strategy** was to provide an update (and lessons) on communication activities to date and set out how the visibility and the outreach of the European Smart Villages Observatory is envisaged in the future, especially to ensure the continuity beyond the end date of the contract.

Among others, the Communication Strategy provided the **specific features of the one-stop webportal** (including its contents, with specific focus on the Smart Villages inventory and the geomapping tool – see section 2.1.1 above).

Further updates and findings on communication activities have been later provided in the Outreach Strategy of the European Smart Villages Observatory (see Task 5.1).

The Smart Rural 27 website

The one-stop shop webportal / **dedicated website of the Smart Rural 27 project** has been hosted on www.smartrural27.eu (set up and technically supported by partner Agricultural University of Athens/ AUA).

The website has evolved over time both in terms of contents and structure. The current structure is as presented in Figure 26. The main contents elements have included:

- Basic **information** about the Smart Rural 27 project, news (and newsletters), Smart Rural **podcasts and blog** articles.
- The **European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory** section with information on all three pillars (knowledge cluster, taskforces and European stakeholder platforms) their events and outcomes as well as information on the overarching Smart Villages Observatory meetings.

- Information on **Smart Villages related policies**, including the CAP analysis (country information and policy lighthouses), and information on the 'Smart Villages and the European Green Deal' analysis.
- Information on **Smart Communities**, including the geomapping tool and lighthouse examples (and related creative material).
- The **Smart Inventory** of Smart Villages resources, with linkages to the Smart Rural 21 resources database.

Figure 26 : The Smart Rural 27 website structure



Source: www.smartrural27.eu

The **website contents have been gradually enhanced** with material on the project, including creative media material, information on the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory and its events, policy outcomes (especially country pages), items within the geomapping tool and within the Smart Villages inventory.

Overall, the Smart Rural 27 website received 46K pageviews from the setting up of the website to the end of April 2024. The top 6 pages (beside the homepage) and number of views in the same reference period are presented in Figure 27. The most visited section has been Smart Communities

Figure 27: Number of pageviews by section

Smart Communities - Smart Rural 27	5.8K
Smart Villages Policies - Smart Rura...	2.2K
Final Conference - Smart Rural 27	1.7K
European Smart Villages Observator...	1.6K
Smart Villages Taskforces - Smart R...	1.3K
Smart Inventory - Smart Rural 27	1.3K

(including the geomapping tool) followed by Smart Villages policies. It is interesting to note that the Final Conference is the third most visited page within the website, despite that it was published only in the running up to and following the event.



Looking more in-depth (see Figure 28) into the website use, data show that some 9 000 users have visited the website in the course of the project, each user visiting 5 pages on average, with an average engagement time of 2m17s on the website.

Figure 28 : The Smart Rural 27 website views data

Search... Rows per page: 10 Go to: 1 1-10 of 1179

Page title and screen class	Views	Users	Views per user	Average engagement time	Event count	Key
	45,979 100% of total	9,009 100% of total	5.10 Avg 0%	2m 17s Avg 0%	133,812 100% of total	All evi
1 Home - Smart Rural 27	10,469	4,023	2.60	47s	32,324	
2 Smart Communities - Smart Rural 27	5,834	1,504	3.88	1m 39s	13,169	
3 Smart Villages Policies - Smart Rural 27	2,160	821	2.63	41s	5,667	
4 Final Conference - Smart Rural 27	1,669	680	2.45	1m 43s	5,766	
5 European Smart Villages Observatory - Smart Rural 27	1,644	722	2.28	44s	4,564	
6 Smart Villages Taskforces - Smart Rural 27	1,295	383	3.38	1m 40s	3,412	
7 Smart Inventory - Smart Rural 27	1,283	720	1.78	24s	3,258	
8 Smart Rural 27 - Smart Rural 27	1,200	759	1.58	44s	3,150	
9 Cluster on Renewable Energy Communities - Smart Rural 27	1,142	537	2.13	58s	3,603	
10 Geomapping tool - Smart Rural 27	1,051	294	3.57	1m 54s	2,224	

Source: Smart Rural 27 website statistics (Google analytics)

Social media activity

The project has established Smart Rural 27 project accounts on **Facebook**, **Twitter** and **YouTube** .

During the project period, a total of 44 posts or re-posts were published on **Facebook**, reaching a total of 143 followers, and achieving a reach of 11 396 (i.e. number of people who saw posts) with 836 likes or reactions garnered through the posts.

The Twitter account gained 281 followers during this period, with a total of 43 tweets generating 7 759 impressions (i.e. number of times tweets have been seen) and 910 engagements.

Additionally, a **YouTube channel** was created especially to livestream events such as the 1st Observatory meeting (180 views), 2nd Observatory Meeting (143 views), and Final Conference 1st day (293 views) and 2nd day (225 views), as well as to publish presentations aimed at disseminating relevant knowledge at various events (such as those presented at the knowledge clusters), as well as the short documentaries on rural community approaches.³⁵

³⁵ Figures on views are as of 18/05/2024.

Beside the central project accounts, some national experts have also been active on social media. **In 17 countries** (Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Greece, Ireland, France Latvia, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Bulgaria), social media channels proved to be effective communication tools for the SR27 project outcomes. These channels included individual or organisational Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn accounts, alongside with Smart Rural 27 project country Facebook and Twitter account in Bulgaria, organisational websites in Czechia and an organisational Instagram account in Ireland.

Through these platforms, information about SR27 project in general, events, projects news and results, the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, key activities of the taskforces, lighthouse examples, and the geomapping tool was shared. A series of posts were shared as follows:

- **A total of 128 posts were shared on individual Facebook** accounts of national experts in 6 countries (Austria, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Netherlands, Romania) and **a total of 41 posts were shared on organisational Facebook** accounts in 5 countries (Estonia, Finland, France Ireland, Latvia) and a dedicated Smart Rural Project Facebook page in Bulgaria (as well as a group titled "Smart Villages в България?" were established, with 29 and 35 posts respectively);
- **A total of 140 posts were shared on the personal Twitter accounts** of national experts from 4 countries (Cyprus, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania) and a total of **8 posts were shared on the organisational Twitter** account in Ireland; as well as a dedicated Twitter account, "@SmartRural27_BG" in Bulgaria was established, with 36 posts/reposts dedicated to the SR27 project as mandated by the initiative;
- A total of **67 posts were shared on personal LinkedIn** accounts of national experts in 6 countries (Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden) and a total of **7 posts were shared on the organisational LinkedIn Account** in Ireland and France and Greece.

Finally, organisational websites were also used in Czechia and France to share information about the project.

[Experimental online platform for exchange](#)

GROOP has been an experimental platform run by an independent software service company (in the UK). GROOP was chosen as it seemed to be a suitable ready-made tool and platform for exchange between stakeholders.

Unfortunately, following the initial setup of GROOP with the support of the software service company and the identification of interested users through the support of national experts and testing the platform internally (first within the core team), it turned out that **GROOP has several deficiencies** that did not allow

the efficient use of the platform. Therefore, the Smart Rural 27 Core Team has decided not to work further with the tool.

Important lessons were drawn from this experimentation as follows:

- **Existing tools on the market do not seem to be fully suitable for the purpose and nature of the project.** Due to the limited time, the Contractor considered **more standard options** for online exchange: regular online communication / newsletter was sent for potential members of the Observatory.
- **Continuity is a key issue:** Even if such platforms are developed, sustaining them requires dedicated and ongoing resources. It both requires financial resources (such as subscription for the App beyond the duration of the project) and considerable human resources for the animation. Without these, the platform cannot be maintained and stakeholder engagement might not continue. Therefore, careful consideration is needed on how far investments in such IT developments are paying off.
- **It is important to test platforms in small-scale first** to make sure it works, before engaging many stakeholders.

[Information sharing through National Rural Networks / National CAP Networks](#)

12 countries - namely Austria, Belgium-Wallonia, Bulgaria, Czechia, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Romania, Slovakia - **reported that their NRN/ CAP Network has shared information about the Smart Rural 27 project** including social media and network website (France, Germany, Italy, Lithuania and Malta and in Romania). Newsletter communication was mentioned in Austria, Ireland, Romania, Slovakia. In Belgium-Wallonia, Italy, Romania and Slovakia the networks' FB accounts, in Belgium-Wallonia the NRN's Twitter account and in Romania the NRN's LinkedIn page was also used to share information about the project (mainly general project information, project news and events).

[Participation & presentations at various events](#)

Participation & presentations at various events by national experts included:

- The **Swedish** national expert sharing information about Smart Rural 27 in the NRN's Smart Villages thematic group on various occasions;
- Dissemination activities and presentation about the project and Smart Villages in general to regional offices and various communities in **Latvia**;
- Presentation by the national expert in Wallonia at the Assembly of the **Walloon Rural Network**;
- Thematic meetings and stakeholder engagements to promote and integrate the concept of Smart Villages in **Bulgaria**;



- Participation of the **Romanian** national expert in various meetings where implementation strategies with Local Action Groups and experts were discussed;
- Participation of national expert in **Cyprus** in 3 conferences with 100-200 participants, presenting the SR27 project;
- Participation/ presentation of **Hungarian** experts at a LEADER national event and a dedicated Local Action Group meeting in Southern Hungary presenting the project and the Smart Villages concept;
- Hosting an online webinar with 30 participants to discuss the concept and the Flemish translation of Smart Villages in **Flanders**;
- Online event with smart rural experts, with approximately 10 participants in **Germany**;
- 8 online seminars with 40 participants also discussing Smart Rural 21 and 27 projects and websites in **Estonia**.

In the wider European context, the Smart Rural 27 (often jointly with Smart Rural 21) project(s) was presented in various events both face-to-face and online including:

- SHERPA Horizon project online event (10/21);
- European Regions Summit on Smart Communities, online (05/22);
- EU Rural Pact Conference, Brussels (06/22);
- European Rural Parliament session, Kielce (Poland) (09/22);
- Danube Region Event, online (10/22);
- CoR NAT Commission event, Lednice (Czechia) (10/22);
- European Week of Regions and Cities, Resilient rural communities in times of crisis, online (10/22);
- European Startup Village Forum, online (02/23);
- European Week of Regions and Cities, Small places matter, Brussels (10/22);
- LEADER Congress, Brussels (12/23);
- Rural Voices Seminar Series organised by University of Galway, online (02/24);
- New European Bauhaus, Catalysing Just Sustainability Transitions, online (04/24).

Other dissemination and communication activities

Direct communication and engagement of rural communities included sharing information with communities about the project and inquire about their possible involvement with the Smart Communities database (Austria); discussions with 7 municipalities on how the SV concept could be applied at the village level (Netherlands); communicating about the SR27 project, proposing integration in the Smart Communities database (Romania); emails to 53 LAGs and 19 regional village NGOs about Smart Rural 27 events and activities (Finland).

Various press releases were made in 4 online newspapers reporting on the endorsement of the Ministry of Innovation of Smart Villages policies and 2 national



newspapers article on Smart Rural Areas in Cyprus; various media campaigns in national and local newspapers on Smart Villages with reference to European practices (Estonia); as well as regular communication and emails to relevant stakeholders on Smart Rural 27 events and summary on the Smart Rural 27 project (Portugal). The Bulgarian NRN actively participated in the implementation of the Bulgarian Taskforce’s Advocacy Campaign.

Transferring the technical elements of the website (Activity 3.2.4)

The technical format of contents to be transferred from Smart Rural 27 website to DG AGRI included at the end of the project the WordPress export format and other file formats (excel database, etc.), as follows:

- **Website Html Export:** This is a completed download of the website using a tool called HTTrack which gets HTML, images, and other files from the server locally. This allows to run the website locally (all webpage texts html or pdf format including visuals and links – that will function until the website is live);
- **Geomapping Database Export;**
- **Wordpress Export:** i.e. export of files from the Wordpress Installation. This also includes every pdf, image inside subfolders;
- **XLSX Exports:** These are the excel exports of the geomapping villages, institutions, institution members, solutions as well as the merged excel file.

Sharing the data above, will enable the Commission to use the website contents and/or rebuild the contents in the future, ensuring continuity of the project depository (e.g. in the EU CAP Network’s website).

2.3.4.2 Lessons learnt from communication actions (Task 3.2)

The communication actions have mostly relied on networking activities (direct contact, events, meetings) with participants of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, i.e. **more personal channels** and tools.

Furthermore, the **website and its tools have been key to share relevant information in an accessible way**. The aim has been to keep the website simple and informative to the users, at all levels, that are primarily those participating in the Pilot Observatory. Therefore, there has been close connection between the work of the observatory and information sharing activities.

Social media has been used to communicate ‘externally’ about the project outcomes, however, this has not been the main communication tool and not used extensively.

Level of activity of individual national experts has varied in terms of their communication actions, some being more active while others carrying out relatively limited communication activities. This also depended on the level of interest and planning of the Smart Villages in a given Member State.



II.4 Work Package 4: Considering the contribution and impact of Smart Villages

Under Work Package 4, two cross-cutting (thematic) tasks have been implemented:

- Task 1.2 on analysing Smart Villages & Covid-19,
- Task 4 on analysing Smart Villages and the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies.

2.4.1 The crisis situation triggered by Covid-19 (Task 1.2)

2.4.1.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 1.2

The purpose of Task 1.2 was to “*analyse how Smart Villages coped with the Covid-19 pandemic*” and to assess whether Smart Villages can be among the potential solutions to contribute to recovery, and also the transition to climate-neutral and green economy (considering subjects such as *strengthening local food supply and consumption among other things*). **A methodological note was prepared** by the project early on to specify how the task will be completed and a comprehensive analytical report has been produced. Among others, the report highlighted that **analysis, research, events to date had been mostly concerned with** (1) how Covid-19 crisis impacted on rural areas, (2) what (emergency reaction / solutions it has triggered from rural communities and (3) what longer term planning and policy support should look like. The report on ‘Smart Villages reply to Covid-19’ **aimed to reflect on existing information from the perspective of Smart Villages**, i.e. what kind of innovative/ smart solutions have emerged as a response to Covid-19 crisis, and most importantly, and how local smart village strategies and higher-level Smart Villages policies could evolve ‘hand-in-hand’ with policy responses to the Covid-19 crisis/ recovery interventions.

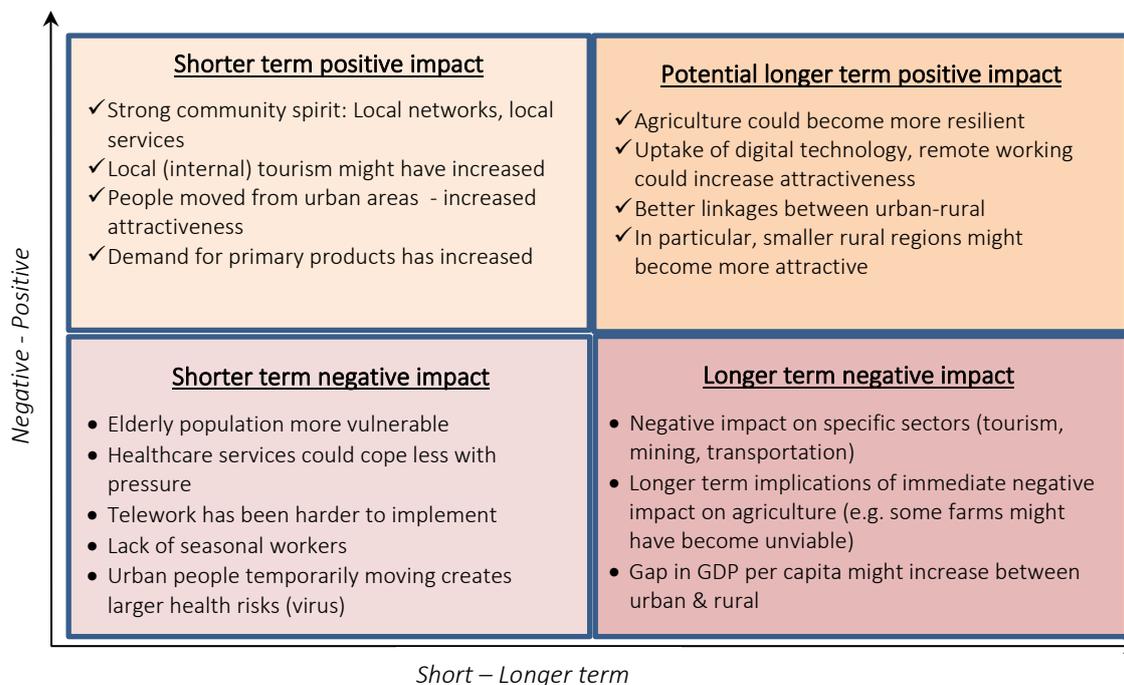
The Covid-19 research in the context of the Smart Rural 27 project aimed to add value to existing research through highlighting the potential of Smart Villages in terms of addressing the long-term impacts of Covid-19.

Covid-19 has put in the spotlight the most important challenges that rural societies and beyond – as we all depend on how rural societies are coping – are facing in the 21st century, including the importance of (1) the use of digital technologies (‘A Europe fit for a digital age’ Commission priority for 2019-2024), (2) the challenges of climate change (‘A European Green Deal’), (3) the importance of local-level community actions (‘A new push for European democracy’); and (4) the lack of diversified and strong local economies (‘An economy that works for people’). The report highlighted Smart Villages contribution in all four areas in the Covid-19 context. It argued that the **Smart Villages concept has the potential to provide an effective local response in rural areas and communities through local innovation** (smart village) strategies to the key challenges and

priorities set by the European Commission for 2019-2024 as well as in the Long Term Rural Vision.

Based on existing Covid-19 research in rural areas, the implications of Covid-19 can be located in a matrix according to (1) to their positive vs. negative impact; (2) and how far the impact might last.

Figure 29 : Covid-19 impact on rural areas



Source: Report on Smart Villages reply to Covid-19 (Task 1.2). Adapted from OECD (June 2020). Policy implications of Coronavirus Crisis for Rural Development. OECD.

In order to see what strategic measures could be taken at local, national and European levels in response to crises, the report **translated existing research findings into a generic SWOT-analysis** of rural communities under Covid-19 (presented in the table below). It has to be stressed that this framework is indicative – i.e. highlights some of the typical strengths/ opportunities/ weaknesses/ and threats that have been highlighted due to Covid-19 but - cannot be generalised for all communities. **The emphasis should be on seizing the ‘opportunities’** through Smart Villages strategic approaches, depending on the specific context of villages.

Table 5: SWOT in response to crises

Strength	Opportunities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Local networks and cooperative structures ✓ Strong local solidarity ✓ Healthy/ rich natural environment ✓ Tourism potential (especially in smaller / less-popular areas) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Higher relevance to enhance quality and use of digital tools & improved broadband connectivity in rural regions ✓ Remote distributed work might increase linkages between urban and rural ✓ Shift in consuming habits can favour local products and (tourism) destinations ✓ Stimulate more localised supply chains ✓ Greater awareness to ensure accessibility to quality services (e-health, e-education) ✓ Reshoring of strategic industries that were once delocalised (e.g. raw materials) ✓ Momentum to accelerate a just transition towards a low-carbon economy of rural communities ✓ Mobilise and strengthen local networks and cooperative structures to face future shocks
Weaknesses	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Inadequate or hard-to-access medical services ▪ Dependence on primary industries ▪ Lack of digital / broadband infrastructure and connectivity ▪ Lower administrative capacity to implement emergency measures (e.g. quarantine) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The gap in GDP per capita between rural areas and cities might widen (due to lower diversification and higher dependency) ▪ Broadband infrastructure and connectivity cannot keep up with the requirements

Source: Report on Smart Villages reply to Covid-19 (Task 1.2)

The report also highlighted specific cases (smart solutions and strategic approaches) both short- and long-term, demonstrated through concrete examples. Finally, the report elaborated on **possible policy responses**.

2.4.1.2 Lessons learnt from the analysis on Smart Villages & Covid-19 (Task 1.2)

The report argued that beside showcasing successful (often short-term smart) solutions, **the attention should shift to long-term planning and preparation** for similar crisis situations in the future. Local communities need to be supported in their long-term aspirations and in developing holistic smart solutions in response to the wider global challenges.

In the wider rural context, the OECD (2020)³⁶ analysis has listed a series of possible policy measures to seize the long-term opportunities offered by the Covid-19 crisis for rural areas. The Study argues that “Measures that can accelerate digitalisation and provide essential services in innovative ways should be at the

³⁶ OECD (2020) Policy Implications of Coronavirus Crisis for Rural Development, Policy Paper, 16 June 2020. Source: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/policy-implications-of-coronavirus-crisis-for-rural-development_6b9d189a-en.



forefront of policy priorities. In addition to these, other relevant measures to leverage some of the opportunities include:

- **Speed up investments in digital infrastructure and supporting ecosystem** to increase the uptake of digital tools in rural areas.
- **Encourage the uptake of remote services** by better adapting national rules to the specificities of rural communities, training of teachers and health care professionals to adopt remote forms of service delivery.
- **Provide financial and technical assistance to support community-based and social innovation projects** that aim at protecting the most vulnerable citizens in rural areas, including the elderly and migrants.
- Include sustainability criteria in COVID-19 recovery actions so that they also contribute to long-term resilience by **addressing climate change and ecological transition**.
- **Support the resilience of rural communities** by enhancing social solidarity networks that meet the basic living standards of the vulnerable citizens in the rural areas.”

The Smart Rural 27 Covid-19 report concluded that in the EU context, **the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas offers a good framing of these ideas, as the main domains defined are well reflecting the key areas where local rural communities** – and supporting organisations and policies – **need to act**, with specific focus on basic services, social and environmental resilience of communities and digital connectivity.

2.4.2 Monitor and assess Smart Villages contribution to the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies, as well as to the EU Green Deal in general (Task 4)

2.4.2.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 4

Task 4 has been integrated within the cross-cutting Work Package 3, according to the project intervention logic. The aim of Task 4 was to:

- **help understand** how rural communities consider their role in achieving the EU Green Deal objectives;
- examine **whether the EU Green Deal has encouraged villages** to act;
- **suggest areas** where the contribution of Smart Villages to the EU Green Deal goals could be the most significant;
- **pave the way** for possible future Smart Villages initiatives.

Concept Note on Task 4 (Activity 4.1)

The Concept Note set out the context and the planned methodology for the analysis on Smart Villages contribution to the European Green Deal (EGD), Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies. The final methodology has been further refined and

extended (e.g. through a dedicated event, see below). The analysis has been carried out by partner Ecolise in cooperation with E40.

Firstly, the analysis aimed to **review existing literature** on the subject of Smart Villages and the Green Deal³⁷ and related topics such as smart cities and rural development.

Secondly, the analysis followed a pragmatic approach, **building on the experience of Smart Villages to date and filtering and analysing aspects that are most relevant to the EGD**, as follows:

- **Local rural community / village context:** The smart solutions and strategies linked to EGD challenges are implemented in various local village / rural community contexts. These local contexts have been analysed.
- **Smart solutions:** A review and analysis were carried out of 169 examples from the geomapping tool³⁸ and the smart solutions database of the Smart Rural 21 project³⁹, according to the EGD themes. Additional information emerging from the Smart Rural 27 Knowledge cluster on Renewable Energy was also used for the 'clean energy' analysis. In this context, **interviews were carried out with selected cluster members/ rural communities** and data and information collected were systematically analysed.
- **Strategic approach:** Review and analysis of the Smart Rural 27 lighthouse examples, i.e., rural communities that demonstrate a strong holistic and strategic approach and smart solutions; as well as the smart village strategies of the selected Smart Rural 21 villages.
- **Participatory approach:** Particular attention has been paid during the analysis to the specific features of the participatory approach, i.e., examples have been reviewed according to their community engagement aspects; and lessons have been drawn with relevance to achieving EGD goals.

Thirdly, the Smart Villages (SV) and European Green Deal (EGD) aspects of the **CAP Strategic Plans approved in 2022** in Member States were reviewed in the context of the CAP analysis of Smart Rural 27, to identify possible synergies between the two concepts (SV and EGD) and to better understand how these have been addressed in the 2023-2027 programming period.

A dedicated online event was organised on 30/06/23⁴⁰ with the participation of interested stakeholders from all levels to collect opinions and views, present the

³⁷ Relevant literature and resources have been integrated within the Smart Rural 27 inventory/resource database.

³⁸ <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-communities/> Note that this also included examples that were in the pipeline (i.e. those that demonstrate strong Smart Villages characteristics but are not yet complete due to some missing information, such as images, or local strategy).

³⁹ <https://www.smartrural21.eu/smart-solutions/>.

⁴⁰ <https://www.smartrural27.eu/sv-the-green-deal/>.

initial findings of research and gather feedback on the analysis. A **short survey** was carried out among stakeholders who registered for the event. The findings of the report were also presented during the Final Conference. As a follow-up to the event, a blog article (written by Ecolise) was published in the final Newsletter.

Report on Smart Villages contribution to the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies (Activity 4.2)

The report on the 'European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies' aimed **to help understand how rural communities consider their role in achieving the European Green Deal**, to examine whether the EGD has encouraged villages to act, and to suggest priority areas for Smart Villages to contribute to the EGD, paving the way for future Smart Village initiatives.

The report has presented research undertaken by Smart Rural 27 partners, including literature review; online event and survey; analysis of smart villages, solutions and smart village strategies from the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects; and an analysis of CAP Strategic Plans, to find synergies with the EGD.

The overall conclusions of the study were as follows.

Rural communities and the European Green Deal: Untapped potential and need for greater alignment.

1. Survey results show that stakeholders perceive a moderate potential for Smart Villages to contribute to the EGD (3.87/5), based on 78 responses. Respondents highlighted the importance of aligning Smart Villages and EGD objectives and **stressed the importance of local approaches to addressing global challenges**. Local rural areas are sources of soil, water, food, energy, and biodiversity, and can contribute to a shift in behaviour and the transformational change needed to reach EGD targets. The importance of innovation was also highlighted, especially promoting links between **local (social) innovation and the ecological transition**. A separate survey among Smart Rural 27 national experts found that most experts felt that EGD objectives are relevant "to some extent" while none regarded EGD objectives as "very relevant" in the implementation of Smart Villages through CAP Strategic Plans.
2. **Some of the most common challenges facing rural communities** are a declining population, lack of services and amenities, limited economic opportunities and environmental challenges (e.g. ecosystem degradation, pollution, forest fires and lack of sustainability awareness). Successful smart solutions, according to the analysis, are holistic in that they address multiple challenges (economic, social, and environmental) and align with local needs and priorities. As the examples in this study reveal, smart initiatives emerge from a combination of factors, such as an active local community and proactive leaders within local government, the private sector or civil society. However, **many rural communities do not have the human capacity or resources**

to bring such initiatives to fruition. To replicate and scale up successful solutions that address strategic environmental and social development goals, **greater capacity building and funding will be needed.**

3. This outcome highlights a **need and an opportunity for greater alignment between rural development priorities**, smart village strategies and European policy if the EGD is to become a transformative agenda for Europe at all levels. Investment in community building is an essential foundational element from which projects and initiatives can then emerge. Smart Villages provide a framework for such engagement in rural areas. **By bringing people together locally to translate higher level goals to the local context**, it creates a space for meaningful citizen engagement in a way that is accessible, tangible and social, helping to catalyse multiple local individual and collective responses. The potential impact of such local responses is evident from existing community-led initiatives in Europe. Fostering social inclusion, self-sufficiency and resilience are aims of many of the villages that are or aspire to become a smart village and **consider green goals as one of their primary smart objectives.**

Priority areas for Smart Villages and the European Green Deal: Food and agriculture, biodiversity, energy, and mobility.

4. Taking together the different sources of data analysed in this study (examples of smart villages, solutions and smart village strategies, survey of workshop participants, analysis of CAP strategies and survey among National Experts), four key thematic priorities emerge out of eight EGD-related themes: **Farm-to-fork, biodiversity, clean energy, and sustainable and smart mobility.** These are followed by climate action, circular economy, sustainable building and renovation, and zero pollution. Although zero pollution and circular economy appear to be a lesser priority among the overall data set, tackling **waste** appears as an important objective among the smart village strategies. **Sustainable tourism** emerges as a strategic priority for many rural villages, aligning with the “greener EU tourism” objective and coinciding with different EGD themes (e.g. mobility, biodiversity, climate action).
5. **Farm-to-fork:** The decline of traditional rural farming and global supply chains have led to outward migration from rural areas and left farmers more isolated. Smart Villages across Europe are seeking to **enhance local food production and promote local products.** By shortening supply chains while supporting jobs, these villages can help to implement the EU Farm-to-Fork strategy. However, for this to happen, sustainable agriculture and organic food production must be a viable business option. **Innovative business models and financial mechanisms, product certification standards, and smart farming technologies** can all support rural farmers to transition to more sustainable practices and retain young workers. Technology and the mechanisation of farming have replaced the cooperation that used to exist in

traditional rural farming communities. At the same time, technology is an essential component in the transition to a sustainable food system.

6. **Knowledge exchange around sustainable and regenerative farming** is crucial but presents a challenge amidst a lack of awareness and misinformation. Farm experiences, tours and markets in rural villages offer an opportunity for citizens to get closer to the food they eat, helping to change behaviour and consumption practices. Smart Villages using the community-based approach are ideally suited to support the further expansion of approaches such as community-supported agriculture (CSA), helping communities to design new ways of cultivating, processing and distributing food to maximise quality, minimise or even achieve positive environmental impacts, and eradicate food waste.
7. **In nearly half of the CAP Strategic Plans analysed, interventions that indirectly support Smart Villages have linkages to the EGD.** Possible linkages can be found in these cases through the interventions that are relevant for both Smart Villages and EGD.
8. **Biodiversity:** Nature brings essential ecosystem services as well as cultural, recreational and aesthetic value to rural communities. This study has found that to carry out successful biodiversity actions at the local level, **mindset change, collaboration between various local stakeholders, diversification of financial resources and measurable common goals are crucial.** Smart villages can be considered a valuable tool in reaching the goals of the EU Biodiversity Strategy and Nature Restoration Law if increasing biodiversity at local level becomes one of the objectives of a local strategy, gathering people around a common vision of their village development.
9. **Clean energy:** Achieving energy autonomy and reaching zero emissions are strategic goals for many rural communities and smart villages. Funding from LEADER and regional authorities represents an important enabler for clean energy initiatives such as renewable energy projects. Greater legal and technical support is needed from relevant ministries and greater flexibility to allow public-private partnerships in sustainable energy communities and other clean energy initiatives.
10. **Sustainable and smart mobility:** Smart Villages can facilitate the shift to a diversity of smart rural mobility solutions (SMARTA, 2023), which are central to meeting climate and environmental goals, as well as quality of life improvements in rural areas. Towns and villages are embracing smart technology, electric mobility and shared transport models to achieve more sustainable and inclusive transport options.
11. **Smart Villages can support the New Green Architecture** of the EGD to increase the level of ambition regarding environmental and climate related objectives by bringing in an injection of innovation and new partnerships for

cooperation. The Just Transition Mechanism (JTM) offers a safety net for those communities that face unprecedented socio-economic challenges in the transition process.

12. **The potential of interventions and programmes** - that are targeted to achieve EGD goals – to also finance relevant actions through Smart Villages has also been highlighted by the survey carried out in preparation for the stakeholder event on 'Smart Villages & the European Green Deal'.

2.4.2.2 Recommendations emerging from the Green Deal analysis

The main recommendations made by the report were as follow:

1. **Better align rural development priorities, smart village strategies and European policies on climate change mitigation and adaptation.** Integrate EGD objectives into SVs by ensuring that SV projects and interventions align with the key goals of the European Green Deal by including Green Deal criteria and indicators in the planning and implementation of Smart Village strategies.
2. **Invest in community building** as an essential foundational element to implement the EGD through financial support, knowledge sharing and capacity building.
3. **Additional funding from the Just Transition Mechanism (JTM)** in combination with the Smart Villages approach is the best way to find pathways for these communities to navigate the transformation to a zero-carbon future and enjoy the quality-of-life improvements that the EGD promises.
4. Create a framework indicating possible linkages between EGD and SV, including identification of EGD related interventions in CSPs that could be used in implementing Smart Village strategies and related funding sources. **In terms of regulations, the interconnections between SV and EGD need to be more structured regarding multi funding and leading policies.** For instance, CAP interventions targeted at renewable energy could be achieved through Smart Village-type interventions (i.e. actions at the local community level) if the two interventions were linked.
5. **Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the progress and impact of Smart Villages interventions on the Green Deal objectives.** This could be done through Member States collecting relevant data and information on supported smart village strategies and solutions in the future (especially those covered by the R.40 indicator – number of smart village strategies supported - of the CAP SPs). Information could be systematically collected about the thematic areas addressed by the strategies and solutions that are relevant for EGD (as carried out through the methodology of this report), this way demonstrating the potential of Smart Villages to achieve EGD goals.

6. **Foster knowledge exchange and ensure capacity building for stakeholders** that are implementing or may implement Smart Villages. In Member States where SV are programmed under LEADER, **Local Action Groups have an important role in integrating EGD objectives in SVs**. EGD objectives need to be translated to the local level to be effectively addressed through relevant interventions.
7. Greater **guidance** is needed, **informed by scientific evidence and local knowledge** on the interactions and trade-offs between agricultural yields, greenhouse gas emissions and biodiversity indicators. To promote regenerative farming, there is a need for accessible practical knowledge and low-cost infrastructure to deliver a fast return on investment.
8. **Promote cooperation** between rural development agents and stakeholder including farmers, local communities, small and micro businesses, and public authorities. Encourage the establishment of partnerships and networks to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and expertise for further engagement and enhancement of co-designing and implementation of Smart Villages interventions that address the specific needs and challenges of rural areas while contributing to the Green Deal objectives, according to local needs. **Linking more closely SV and, in a broader extent LEADER, to EIP operational groups, in the setting up of AKIS and demonstration measures** as these are interventions in which cooperation and innovation are key elements.
9. **Ensure that socio-economic needs and a just transition are embedded within environmental objectives**. As the report has shown, the Smart Village initiatives considered most successful and innovative are those that address multiple social, economic and ecological challenges simultaneously within rural communities. Rural communities offer practical examples of holistic solutions and socio-ecological innovation that can support a just transition within the context of the EGD.

II.5 Work Package 5: Dissemination of the results

Work Package 5 has concerned the effective dissemination of results of the Smart Rural 27 project, including an outreach strategy for the EU Smart Villages Observatory, a project leaflet summarising main outcomes, and the Final event.

2.5.1 Outreach strategy (Task 5.1)

The purpose of the Outreach Strategy was to provide a framework on how the main outcomes of the project could be shared and disseminated using the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory. The strategy **set out how the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory was set up and has been used for dissemination purposes**. It provided an overview of the observatory structure and activities, as well as some initial lessons on the possibility of



sustaining the observatory and lessons learned through outreach activities to date. The main lessons are summarised in other parts of this report (including 2.3.3 Lessons learnt through the operation of the Pilot Smart Villages Observatory as well as on 2.3.4.2 Lessons learnt from communication actions (Task 3.2)) and therefore, are not repeated here).

2.5.2 Draft Leaflet and Executive Summary (Task 5.2)

A draft leaflet and executive summary were developed – according to the extended deadline of the project – by early 2024. These documents have been refined together with this Final Report – to ensure the harmonisation of the contents. The cover page and a sample page of the Smart Rural 27 leaflet is displayed in Figure 30).

Figure 30 : Sample pages of the Smart Rural 27 Leaflet



THE SMART RURAL 27 PROJECT

The 2nd Preparatory Action, was running from Dec 2020 to May 2024 and aimed to **prepare Member States and rural communities for the implementation of Smart Villages** within the Common Agricultural Policy post-2020, as well as other EU policies which could potentially support the emergence of additional Smart Villages across the European Union. In line with the overall objective of the project, **four specific objectives** have been set:

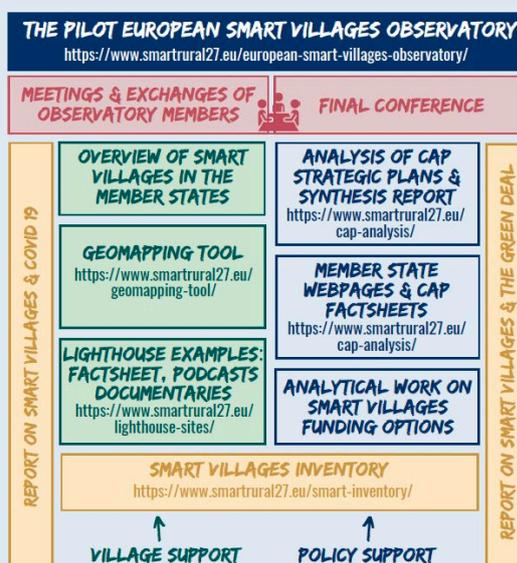
PROVIDE KNOWLEDGE, KNOWHOW ON SMART VILLAGES

INFORM AND IMPROVE THE DEVELOPMENT OF CAP STRATEGIC PLAN AND OTHER POLICIES

FACILITATE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF SMART VILLAGE STRATEGIES

SET-UP & PROMOTE LIGHTHOUSE EXAMPLES FOR EFFECTIVE PROGRAMMING

Key activities to support rural communities/ villages & improve policy carried out by the project are presented in the figure to the right.



1

Source: Draft Leaflet (E40, 2024)

No specific lessons are drawn from this activity. One possible recommendation is to develop such a leaflet towards the beginning of a project with focus on the planned activities (rather towards the end), to allow use for project promotion.

2.5.3 Final Conference (Task 5.3)

2.5.3.1 Description of the purpose and contents of Task 5.3

The Final Conference aimed to share experience accumulated and lessons learnt through the 2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century with a wide range of interested stakeholders and to discuss the future of Smart Villages. It was held on the **18-19 March 2024** in **Brussels** (Belgium). The two-day Final Conference was organised face-to-face and **livestreamed** on [Smart Rural 27 YouTube channel](#). All information about the event and presentations have been shared on the Smart Rural 27 website⁴¹. The agenda of the event is presented in Figure 31).

⁴¹ <https://www.smartrural27.eu/final-conference/>.

Figure 31 : Agenda of the Final Conference



PROGRAMME

LES ATELIERS DES TANNEURS
Rue des Tanneurs 60A, 1000 Bruxelles, Belgium

18 MARCH 2024

Lessons from the Smart Rural 27 project

12.00 - 13.00	Registration of participants (snacks, coffee & networking) <i>Event moderated by Ed Thorpe & Edina Ocsko (E40)</i>
13.00 - 14.00	Welcome by the European Commission <i>Margaret Bateson-Missen (DG AGRI, Head of Unit B.3 'Social sustainability')</i> Introduction to the Smart Rural 27 project & the event , <i>Edina Ocsko (SR27)</i>
14.00 - 14.45	Working with rural communities through Smart Rural 27 <i>Presentations by Smart Rural 27 Lighthouse examples</i> <i>Fritz Pichler (Stanz, AT), Mette Adolfsson (Häradsbäck, SE), Katri Lindberg (Raudanmaa, FI), Aymeric Seron, Lila Plet, Louisia Georges-Rieu (Lormes, FR), Kyriakos Kareklas (Athienou, CY), Michael Kristensen (Samso, DK), Robert Fekete (Olaszfa, HU) & Nicola Zanca (Gaiba, IT)</i>
14.45 - 15.15	Coffee break
15.15 - 16.00	Smart Rural 27 outcomes on improving Smart Village policies <i>National Smart Rural 27 Taskforces</i> <i>Michael Fischer (AT), Xavier Delmon (BE-Wallonia), Makis Papamichael (CY), Rut Bizkova (CZ), Kim Smedslund (FI), Miklos Maacz (HU), Pat Kennedy (IE), Zanda Dimanta-Svilpe (LV), Andrzej Halasiewicz (PL), Magda Porta (PT)</i> <i>Outcomes of the SR27 European Green Deal research & Digital Services Knowledge Cluster</i> <i>Jane Feeney (Ecolise), Lutz Kubitschke (empirica)</i>
16.00 - 17.30	Visit your stands of interest: Smart Villages Marketplace Ground floor: Poster session Upper floor: Smart Rural Communities' stands
17.30 - 17.45	Conclusions of Day 1
19.30 - 21.00	Walking Dinner (Les Ateliers des Tanneurs)



PROGRAMME

19 MARCH 2024

What can be done to make Smart Villages happen

8.30 - 8.45	Introduction to the Purpose of the Day , <i>Edina Ocsko (SR27)</i>
8.45 - 10.00	Dialogue on the Smart Villages implementation framework - Outcomes of the CAP Analysis on dedicated Smart Villages interventions , <i>Edina Ocsko (SR27)</i> - Example of CAP dedicated Smart Villages intervention <i>Marianne Selkäinaho (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, FI)</i> - Outcomes of the CAP Analysis on LEADER interventions , <i>Katrina Idu (SR27)</i> - Example of LEADER support to Smart Villages from a LAG's perspective <i>Carlo Salot (Escartons and Valli Valdesi LAG, IT)</i> - Smart Rural 27 findings on other policies , <i>Edina Ocsko (SR27)</i> - Example of supporting Smart Villages beyond the CAP <i>Renáta Kučerová (Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, CZ)</i> Q&A
10.00 - 10.15	Why Smart Villages is a crucial policy tool for rural areas <i>Franc Bogovič (MEP)</i>
10.15 - 10.30	Introduction to the workshops
10.30 - 11.00	Coffee break
11.00 - 12.30	Workshops Round 1: What knowledge and experience we can build on Examples of Smart Villages support & discussion 1. Supporting Smart Villages through dedicated interventions of the CAP Strategic Plans 2. Supporting Smart Villages through LEADER 3. Capacity-building on Smart Villages through National CAP Networks' activities 4. Supporting Smart Villages through a wide range of policies, as called for under the Rural Pact 5. Resilient & sustainable communities: Building environmentally & socially sustainable communities 6. Resilient & sustainable communities: Building sustainable communities with support of digital technology
12.30 - 13.30	Buffet lunch
13.30 - 14.30	Workshops Round 2: Working on practical recommendations Practical support for the implementation of Smart Villages [Same groups as Round 1]
14.30 - 15.30	Feedback from the workshop discussions <i>Reflection on the future of Smart Villages by Panel</i> <i>Facilitated by Maria Gafo Gomez-Zamalloa (DG AGRI, Deputy Head of Unit B.3 'Social sustainability')</i> <i>Pawel Krzeczunowicz (CAP Network, PL), Radim Sršeň (Ministry of Regional Development, CZ),</i> <i>Michael Kristensen (Samso, DK), Tom Jones (ERCA), Ellen Lundkvist (LEADER Gute, SE)</i>
15.30 - 15.45	Concluding remarks <i>Mihail Dumitru (DG AGRI, Deputy Director-General) and Edina Ocsko (SR27)</i>

The 2nd Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century is supported by the European Commission (DG AGRI) under Contract No AGRI-2020-0332

Supported by the:



European
Commission

Source: E40, 2024

In preparation for the meeting, 6 discussion papers were also prepared to inform the discussions on:

- [How Smart Villages is supported under novel dedicated CAP interventions beyond LEADER?](#)
- [What LEADER LAGs need to support Smart Villages](#)
- [National CAP Networks' support for Smart Villages](#)
- [How Smart Villages can be supported beyond the CAP?](#)
- [What can be done to ensure climate and social resilience of rural communities?](#)
- [Is digital for us?](#)

153 participants joined the Final Conference from all levels and from a wide range of organisations including local rural communities, LEADER LAGs, CAP Managing Authorities, other ministry representatives, national CAP Networks, representatives of regions, European stakeholder organisations, European project (such as Horizon 2020) representatives and representatives of the European Commission. In the final conference report, the presentations and the outcomes and reflections from the discussions were presented.

2.5.3.2 Main lessons emerging from the Final Conference

Overall, the event received highly positive feedback, **91% of respondents rated it very useful** (4 at a range of 1 to 4) and 9% of respondents found that there were some useful sessions (3 at a range of 1 to 4). The main language of the conference was English, simultaneous interpretation was provided in French and German (although this service has only been used by 1 participant/ day).

The main messages of the event have been synthesised in the final conference report as follows:

- **The Pilot Study on Smart Eco-social Villages and the two preparatory actions (Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects)** have aimed to prepare the ground for an effective implementation of Smart Villages, starting from defining Smart Villages, through supporting pilot rural communities in developing smart village strategies and implementing smart village projects, towards creating an effective Smart Villages support framework at all levels through engaging stakeholders and build their capacities (including the setting up of a European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory).
- We need to move forward and build on the knowledge accumulated and consolidate and extend the Smart Village support environment. Instead of “where are we”, we should now focus on “where are we going”: Future actions should focus on **how Smart Villages are implemented through various EU, national and regional policies and local innovative actions in rural communities**. There are some promising developments under the 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans (SPs); at the same time there is a need to increase the engagement of stakeholders in the implementation of relevant CAP

interventions, as well as to increase the support for Smart Villages from other funds and policies beyond the CAP.

- **Smart Villages is holistic and complex concept** - this complexity needs to be captured, which is a long-term process. Therefore, the support framework needs to adapt to this complexity including the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders.



Source: Final Conference – Marketplace

- The main support is programmed under CAP in the 2021-2027 programming period, where Smart Villages can be supported through a **dedicated investment or cooperation interventions and through LEADER** that may also complement the dedicated intervention.
- The diversity of local actors involved in Smart Villages and the diversity of local needs require a **complex and multi-funded approach**. The synergies need to be created among CAP interventions but also with Cohesion Policy and national and regional programmes.
- Without resilient rural areas there will be no resilient Europe. The current **political momentum – including the Rural Pact – has highlighted the need for more focus on supporting rural areas and community-led, bottom-up, territorial innovative approaches possibly through future dedicated Local Development / Rural Development Policies**. In order to achieve effective support for rural communities – including Smart Villages - stakeholders from all levels need to be involved. The event called for action, from all participants, encouraging them to **“go home with some inspiration and reflect on what each of us can do in our country”**.



Source: Final Conference – Final Policy panel

From left to right: *Maria Gafo Gomez-Zamalloa (Deputy Head of Unit, European Commission, DG AGRI), Michael Kristensen (Samso, DK), Radim Sršeň (Ministry of Regional Development of Czech Republic), Ellen Lundkvist (LEADER Gute, Sweden) Pawel Krzczunowicz (National CAP Network in Poland), Tom Jones (President of ERCA)*



III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations emerging based on the lessons of the project have been structured under four main themes:

1. Continued capacity-building and awareness-raising on Smart Villages;
2. Improving the policy framework for Smart Villages;
3. Call for multi-funded Smart Villages;
4. Continuing the Smart Villages Observatory.

III.1 CONTINUED CAPACITY-BUILDING AND AWARENESS-RAISING ON SMART VILLAGES

3.1.1 The need for capacity-building on Smart Villages

Local rural communities were in the focus of support of the 1st Preparatory Action on Smart Rural areas in the 21st Century (Smart Rural 21 project⁴²). Based on the experience of the Smart Rural 21 project, it became evident that **it is crucial to provide continuous and direct support to rural communities.**

Following up on the Smart Rural 21 experience, the **Smart Rural 27 project has experimented with various forms of local support**, including sharing of information and good practices towards communities: the geomapping tool (smart village database), communication products (9 lighthouse factsheets, 2 documentaries and 3 podcasts), and peer-to-peer exchange: 3 cross-visits and 2 knowledge exchange platforms for rural communities. The knowledge clusters were developed as an additional component under the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, due to interest expressed by communities **to exchange experience and knowledge on smart practices on common themes of interest.**

Among all types of support, the most appreciated one seems to be the practical peer-to-peer exchanges, especially when communities are offered the opportunity to visit each other and see smart practices at first-hand (cross-visits). **Such capacity-building activities need to be further planned**, e.g. through the support activities of the national CAP Networks or other support organisations (e.g. village associations).

Municipalities (local communities / villages) - defined according to the national context - **should be a clear target of Smart Villages support** actions/interventions. Villages are defined differently in the various Member States. Most Member States target Smart Villages support at municipalities indirectly, i.e.

⁴² www.smartrural21.eu.

expecting LEADER “to do the job”. However, while it is one of the most suitable means, LEADER should not necessarily be the only and/or main instrument to support Smart Villages. **Ultimately direct local (municipality/village)-level support and capacity-building** – that often does not get sufficient attention – in terms of developing strategies and identifying and planning smart solutions need to be developed. Interventions directly targeted at the local / community level **should include preparatory support, animation/ capacity-building, financing of the preparation of strategy development & implementation of smart actions.**

At the same time, **it is important to recognise that rural communities have very limited capacity to engage in capacity-building actions** (one of the lessons from the knowledge cluster work). Often, they need basic support in developing the right ideas (e.g. on digital services) rather than financial support for implementing project ideas readily available.

Examples of support include: the **Lithuanian MA** carries out capacity-building activities as part of pilot projects⁴³ preparation process in the form of training events, individual consultations, workshops organised by national CAP network, and MA is planning to conduct an evaluation of pilot projects and dissemination of good practices. The **Hungarian MA** is planning information events for LAGs and later mandatory training for the beneficiaries of the Smart Villages intervention. **Poland** indicated that capacity-building was provided during the transition period also resulting in a publication entitled ‘Smart village concept – Examples from Poland’⁴⁴ that serves as inspiration for interested stakeholders, and a LEADER Guidance for Polish LAGs was also developed in the context of Polish Task Force under Smart Rural 27.

Dedicated Smart Villages CSP interventions – beyond LEADER support – are very important in this context and are **strongly encouraged in all Member States**. Most dedicated CSP interventions to date are **cooperation interventions** with a focus on a wide range of (local) stakeholders. While it is reasonable to engage various local stakeholders in smart actions, it is important to keep the strategic (rather than project) focus, and as such, having local public authorities or other community representatives (e.g. village associations) as core partners/beneficiaries (which is a requirement in some of the Member States with dedicated interventions).

⁴³ During the transition period of 2021-2022 15 rural LAGs (out of 49) received additional support to their Local Development Strategies to implement pilot projects related to Smart Villages. Each LAG received EUR 240 000 (the total allocation was EUR 3 600 000).

⁴⁴ Kalinowski et al. (2022): Smart village concept – Examples from Poland. Institute of Rural and Agricultural Development, Polish Academy of Sciences.



3.1.2 Smart Villages strategies vs. smart village projects

There is often a lack of clarity on the differentiation and emphasis on smart village strategy and smart project development and support, that has been particularly visible in the design of the CAP interventions. The CAP analysis found that there is a confusion in the current description of Smart Villages interventions on whether they concern smart strategies, smart projects or both, which is likely to result in uncertainties among potential beneficiaries as well.

The Guidebook on How to Become a Smart Village (2022) **has had a dedicated section on 'Why is a smart village strategy needed at all?'**, highlighting that *"A smart village strategy is at the core of the Smart Villages concept. [...] A strategy is relevant for structured and long-term thinking. [...] The smart village strategy can also be an effective tool for communicating about the vision of a village."* At the same time it was stressed that: *"It is important that smart village strategies are not just developed as formalities. [...] Indeed, many Member States will require a simplified concept or plan to avoid disproportionately overburdening villages."*

Managing Authorities should provide specific guidance on what the minimum requirements are for a strategy and/or project in the context of Smart Villages calls. The design of the eligibility and selection criteria (and related guidance and training) for calls will be essential steps towards more clarity on the distinction between smart village strategy and smart project requirements.

Overall, it is recommended that Smart Villages support is linked to the development of smart village strategies (or possibly simplified versions of strategies – such as more integrated smart village action plans or concepts like in Poland). At the same time, **Member States should not request complex documents** and create too many formal procedures for smart village strategies. Rather some evidence should be required for the longer-term integrated approach and thinking in the supported local communities. For instance, supported smart projects should respond to specific local challenge(s) set out in the strategies, should be new in the local context (ideally also building on modern technologies/digitalisation), with a clear expected impact in the local community, i.e. triggering (substantial) change in response to a local challenge.

At European level, there is a need to set clearer requirements on smart village strategies, including the definition of R.40 indicator (in the performance monitoring and evaluation guidance). For instance, the development of a dedicated Guidance building on the experience accumulated through the Smart Rural 21 and 27 projects and beyond could be considered.

Smart village project examples are important to provide inspiration for rural communities on the kind of smart solutions to implement and how. At the same time, due to their nature, it is important that Smart Village project examples also **demonstrate how the individual projects impact on the local rural**



community / village as a whole, i.e. not just to focus on the isolated project/initiative or beneficiary(s).

Based on the experience of the Smart Rural 27 geomapping tool, **it is still too early to develop a comprehensive Smart Villages Database** (e.g. similar to the LEADER LAGs database). This has also been reflected in the challenges of identifying the right villages for the geomapping tool. Until there is no clear definition and criteria on what constitutes a smart village / rural community – e.g. based on information about supported rural communities / villages by the Smart Villages CSP interventions – it is also hard to decide which communities should be included in a Smart Villages database. One possibility during this transition period is to continue follow the Smart Rural 27 approach in terms of applying criteria based on the EU’s Smart Villages definition (i.e. concern local community/ village level, requirement of having a strategy, at least one smart solution). Even when initial CAP-supported examples become available, the picture might be very diverse in terms of supported projects vs. strategies that might not allow a consistent approach for a smart rural communities database development. **At the same time, a ‘catalogue’ of rural communities supported by Smart Village interventions** - distinguishing between those that developed smart village strategies and those where ‘only’ smart projects were supported – could be considered.

3.1.3 Define Smart Villages in the national context

An EU definition of Smart Villages was created by the Smart Eco-social Villages Pilot Project. This provides a broad framework and specifies the key components of Smart Villages. However, **there is no official definition of Smart Villages in the CAP regulation and therefore**, Member States have a lot of flexibility on how they apply the definition provided by the Pilot Project, and it is important to translate the definition into the national contexts.

In relation to the Smart Villages definition, **key questions** have been raised such as:

- Is it a requirement to design some forms of smart village strategies (action plans, concepts, etc.) at the local level, or is it sufficient to design projects/ project plans?
- At what level (e.g. LAGs or local communities) are smart village strategies designed? Who is in the “lead”: local level municipalities/ villages, other local associations or LEADER LAGs when it comes to designing the strategy?
- What are the quality requirements for a strategy? What should a strategy entail exactly and how these characteristics will be validated?
- Is innovation defined in general? Is digitalisation a requirement or innovation is defined more broadly, e.g. including social innovation without

technological / digital innovation? What are the quality characteristics of a smart project and how these can be validated?

- How far it is requested to include municipalities in the Smart Villages interventions, and how far other entities (e.g. local NGOs, associations, research, etc.) are involved?
- Is “rural area” defined for Smart Villages, e.g. in terms of population size, population density, etc.?
- Is participatory approach a requirement for Smart Villages? Is it defined what participatory approach is?
- Is cooperation among various stakeholders a requirement? Which stakeholders (municipalities and beyond) should be involved?
- What distinguishes Smart Villages from other concepts and programmes (including LEADER and various national / regional village support programmes)?

Being specific, comprehensive and clear on the above aspects and the linked support framework (interventions, eligibility, selection criteria, etc.) are crucial for the effective communication and implementation of Smart Villages. **Clarity is also the basis of the effective awareness-raising, communication** and implementation of Smart Villages.

3.1.4 Further clarity & awareness-raising

Regular communication on the relevance and implementation of the Smart Villages concept is needed further to raise awareness and provide more clarity on the concept. **A prerequisite** of effective communication is creating clarity on the Smart Villages definition in the specific national contexts.

Smart Villages information needs to be continuously shared, especially as the implementation of relevant CAP interventions are advancing. A wide range of communication material could be developed, especially:

- **Policy insights** to highlight relevant Smart Villages policy practices that others can learn from, especially implementation aspects of various Smart Villages interventions within LEADER and beyond. These will be more and more important as the programming advances.
- **Good practices**, including inspiring examples of smart village strategies and smart projects supported under various CAP interventions (both dedicated Smart Villages interventions and LEADER).
- **Various articles and publications on Smart Villages in the CAP**, for instance (regular) articles in magazines highlighting relevant practices of smart villages or policy implementation and project brochure on supported smart village strategies and projects.

- Targeted **communication for LEADER stakeholders** on Smart Villages will be important. Regular articles on Smart Villages could be published in LEADER Newsletter(s) (similar to the current idea of the Smart Village Corner on the CAP Network website).
- **The update of the CAP Smart Villages factsheets (for each CAP Strategic Plan)** could be considered in the future in consultation with the Managing Authorities.
- **The EU CAP Network's Agricultural & Rural Inspiration Award** could also include as a theme/ dedicated award for smart villages, rewarding inspiring integrated/ holistic approaches of local rural communities (rather than individual projects).

III.2 IMPROVING THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR SMART VILLAGES

3.2.1 Learning from Smart Villages interventions

According to the analysis of the CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs) 2023-2027, **seven Member States planned in their CSPs nine dedicated interventions** – other than LEADER - to support Smart Villages: Austria (3), Finland (1), Hungary (1), Italy (1), Lithuania (1), Poland (1), Spain/Galicia (1). Most Member States are planning to realise Smart Villages within LEADER. **There is direct reference to LEADER support for Smart Villages in 18** (AT, BE-Flanders, BG, CY, CZ, EE, EL, FI, HR, HU, IR, IT, LV, LU, PL, RO, SE, SI) of the 28 CAP SPs, including 5 countries with dedicated interventions.

The implementation of these interventions needs to be closely followed/ monitored and knowledge needs to be shared, especially the experience of the countries where dedicated interventions are included in the CSPs, **facilitating peer-to-peer learning**.

The overview of the CAP Strategic Plan analysis shows that there are still many **uncertainties around the programming of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans** (such as the lack of definition of Smart Villages in the national context, how far digitalisation should be a focus, what the distinction should be between strategies and projects, how LEADER LAGs can integrate Smart Villages within their strategies and how to implement these, etc.).

Smart Villages is still a new concept in the context of EU programming and therefore, the 2023-2027 CAP SP and other programme implementation in the context of Smart Villages is still **considered to be an experimental/ piloting phase**.

The provisions on Smart Villages interventions under the CSPs are fairly generic at the moment, and the need for **more specific guidance parallel (or prior) to the design of the calls will be needed at national/ regional levels**. This will shed light on the specificities of Smart Villages in the national contexts, including eligibility and selection criteria, informed by the definition of Smart Villages.

While specific guidance for potential beneficiaries is needed at the national level, the **European Commission should also provide an overview** of Smart Villages implementation at the European level at a later stage – when implementation of the relevant interventions is more advanced - with specific examples from Member States on topics such as how the EU definition is translated into the national contexts, what eligibility and selection criteria are, and how LEADER LAGs apply the concept.

3.2.2 Combine various CAP interventions

Beside the dedicated Smart Villages interventions and LEADER, **it is important to combine and create synergies with other CAP SP rural development interventions** for the benefit of rural communities and implementation of Smart Villages. The themes and context of several CAP SP interventions are suitable for supporting Smart Village projects, in particular:

- Cooperation interventions (e.g. Short supply chains);
- Knowledge and innovation in agriculture, food and rural development (including EIP-AGRI / AKIS);
- Investments interventions for infrastructure and improved services;
- Investments interventions in renewable energy;
- Local entrepreneurship (start-up interventions), diversification and tourism.

Managing Authorities need to try to make good use of these interventions for the benefit of rural communities/ smart villages. For instance, **additional scores** could be granted in the selection process in case a municipality is applying for funding in line with its (approved) smart village strategy. It is important to map and raise awareness among municipalities about the calls under various programmes and funds that might be relevant to support their smart actions (in line with the smart village strategies).

In several CAP Strategic Plans, Smart Villages are also mentioned under **Modernisation (AKIS & Digitalisation)**. The most relevant thematic areas identified include improving quality of life, services, using digital technology. Smart Villages **could be supported more through EIP-AGRI Operational Groups** (so far only Austria directly specified this intervention as supporting Smart Villages).



3.2.3 Supporting Smart Villages through LEADER

LEADER is the main tool to implement Smart Villages in many of the Member States. However, Member States and regions mostly programmed Smart Villages under LEADER as this seemed to be the safest option, and due to the similarities between the Smart Villages and the LEADER principles. Several Member States did not provide any specifications in the CAP SP on how Smart Villages will be implemented under LEADER, neither on how R.40 will be achieved by the LAGs and what the expected target values are, as these are mostly to be defined in the Local Development Strategies (LDSs) and later project calls.

Most Member States expect LAGs to programme Smart Villages within their LDSs, and Managing Authorities await how far this is happening. Generally, there is **no additional funding provided for Smart Villages implementation for LEADER LAGs** that include Smart Villages in their LDSs, although this is an option that could still be considered by Member States.

Further efforts need to be invested in the **effective support of Smart Villages within LEADER**, in particular in the following areas:

- **Raising awareness** about the Smart Villages concept and its relevance among the LEADER LAGs;
- **Capacity-building** for LAGs to take **on a 'caretaker' role**, including how to animate the Smart Villages process, participatory approach, strategy development, promotion of smart solutions, monitoring progress;
- **Capacity-building** for LAGs by Managing Authorities **on what R.40 indicator means** precisely (e.g. projects vs. strategies) and how to achieve it;
- Information exchange among LAGs **on relevant practices** (both animation activities for Smart Villages and smart projects supported);
- **Monitoring progress of LAGs** and their LDSs on including, and later supporting smart village strategy development and support for smart projects;
- Making available **more dedicated funding for LEADER LAGs** who support rural communities in Smart Village strategies and projects.

Capacity-building should first concern CAP Managing Authorities on how to support LEADER LAGs in implementing Smart Villages. Dedicated capacity-building activities (events) could be organised for MAs – e.g. by the EU CAP Network - on this aspect. Such events **could** cover themes on how to provide additional incentives to LAGs to support Smart Villages, how to create a flexible administrative framework for LEADER LAGs (i.e. not to create additional burden at the level of LAGs but rather incentives to experiment), how to monitor Smart Villages activities (especially the number of Smart Village strategies/ projects). **Opportunities for exchange among Managing Authorities and LAGs** should be created at the European level. Such support has been provided within the

Stakeholder Platforms of the European Pilot Smart Village Observatory. Support can build on the relevant activities of the Smart Rural 27 project, for instance the work of the Smart Rural 27 taskforces. Similar activities could be integrated into the activities of one of the European structures, such as the EU CAP Network, the Rural Pact Community, or supported at the initiative of stakeholder networks such as the Smart Village Network and ELARD.

LEADER LAGs also need capacity-building. This can be ideally provided at the national level, adapting the support to the specific design of the relevant CAP SPs. National CAP Networks and national LEADER Networks are ideally placed to provide such support within their activities.

Future **guidance for LEADER LAGs could cover topics such as:** how to implement Smart Villages interventions through supporting local communities in developing smart village strategies or similar strategic forward-looking concepts/ action plans, on how to support smart solutions, how to facilitate participatory approaches, what criteria to apply for all these aspects. **Guidance is particularly requested on what is a smart solution** (what should be considered innovative), how far digital solutions are a requirement, what smart solutions are supported under Smart Villages. Some of the SR27 taskforces focused on such activities (e.g. in Poland and Hungary)⁴⁵. Previously some Member States - such as Estonia (LEADER LAG training programme⁴⁶) and Ireland (Smart Village training for Local Development Companies⁴⁷) - were running dedicated support actions on Smart Villages to LAGs. This experience can be built on in the future.

Very often LEADER and other interventions focus on project support, however, **it would be important to also support the preparatory activities for smart village strategies and projects.** Good use can be made of the Smart Rural 21 methodology and the '*How to Become a Smart Village*' Guidebook. It is also important to understand what the differences are between LEADER and Smart Villages, which boils down to transferring the LEADER methodology to the local community level (especially in terms of strategic thinking at the village level) and reinforcing innovation within LEADER in the context of local communities, in close collaboration with municipalities within the LAG area.

In the future CAP Regulation, the European Commission could also consider how LEADER LAGs could further support smart villages making it a specific task of LEADER LAGs to support local municipalities to become smart villages.

⁴⁵ In Poland the development of a dedicated LEADER Guidance has been developed; in Hungary, a training session took place for LEADER LAGs on what Smart Villages concept is and how it could be integrated into the LEADER LDSs; see <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/>.

⁴⁶ See more details here: https://www.smartrural21.eu/wp-content/uploads/WS2.2-Kristiina-Tammets_presentation.pdf.

⁴⁷ See more information here: <https://training.etownz.ie/>.

3.2.4 Ongoing adjustment of CAP Strategic Plans & implementation provisions

The implementation of the CAP SPs started on 1st January 2023. The implementation of direct Smart Villages interventions has not yet started in most countries. However, calls have already been launched in Finland, Lithuania and Austria.

Since in most countries Smart Villages are programmed through LEADER, **Smart Villages implementation will depend on the approval of LEADER strategies and launching of local calls.** The expected launch of LEADER calls in most countries are expected by mid-2024, except of some countries where the project calls are ongoing (e.g. Denmark, Flanders (Belgium) and Finland).

Generally, more information and data need to be collected from Member States at the European level once calls are published and implemented, including:

- Information on the calls (eligibility and selection criteria, beneficiaries, etc.) and guidance provided to stakeholders in relation to calls;
- Information on selected smart village strategies and projects (with focus on their themes);
- Information on how LEADER LAGs included Smart Villages in their strategies;
- Information on LEADER calls and beneficiaries for Smart Villages.

It is important that CAP (and other policy) programming is not a one-off activity and does not conclude with the launch of CAP SPs but is an ongoing process. Therefore, policies can be adapted at different stages of the programming, including amendments to the CAP Strategic Plans. In fact, several Member States already made amendments to their strategies since the CAP analysis carried out by Smart Rural 27.

There **is also still scope for the provision of further methodological guidance by the European Commission** to Member States, amendments by the Member States to the CAP SP, and refinements through the specificities of the call design and implementation. Member States can also adapt technical assistance activities to the needs of Smart Villages. Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation will provide important lessons and information on outputs and results that can further contribute to Smart Villages policy improvements.

Finally, during the preparation for the post-2027 EU programming, Smart Villages support should be considered within the discussions about the future of rural areas.



3.2.5 The role of CAP Networks

CAP Networks are ideally positioned to provide the relevant support, with the ultimate aim of improving Smart Villages implementation in the CAP. There is limited support specified to date in the CAP SPs for the national CAP Networks in relation to Smart Villages, although the potential of providing support has been highlighted by many national experts.

The potential of national CAP Networks to provide support needs to be better exploited. Typical networking activities include the development and sharing of good practices on Smart Villages, organisation of training and events for Smart Villages, facilitate exchange among relevant stakeholders, organise SV competitions and awards, develop research and publications to raise awareness, support for LEADER LAGs. In the national context, Smart Village support activities should primarily **be targeted at municipalities and LAGs**, but could also include other beneficiaries. CAP Networks should build these activities – in collaboration with the Managing Authorities – within their future action plans.

At the European level, **the European CAP Network could follow up on the work of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory** in the context of capacity-building activities for the national CAP Networks and provide support to Managing Authorities and CAP Networks to better design Smart Village support, with particular focus on **peer-to-peer learning**. Smart Villages support activities are relevant for the work of all three support units of the EU CAP Network:

- Future **thematic exchanges on CAP implementation** might focus on '*How Smart Villages can be effectively implemented within the CAP*'. The Smart Rural 27 project completed the detailed analysis of how Smart Villages in the CSPs has been designed and drew lessons from initial implementation experience⁴⁸. The EU CAP Network could follow up on this work. **There are several unexplored areas** where – due to its timing – Smart Rural 27 could not fully assess the **CAP implementation on Smart Villages**, in particular: how the dedicated Smart Villages interventions will be implemented in practice, including technical aspects on the selection and eligibility criteria, the use and measurement of R.40, the differences in terms of selecting and supporting smart village strategies vs. smart village projects, the support to Smart Villages through LEADER. These are key topics that analytical work and exchanges should continue on in the future. **Thematic work could focus on both CAP programming aspects** (e.g. implementation of dedicated Smart Villages interventions, LEADER etc.) **as well as thematic aspects that are relevant for Smart Villages** (e.g. Smart Villages to support climate change, Smart Villages to support digital innovation, etc.). Sharing experience of good

⁴⁸ See for instance policy lighthouse examples of Austria and Lithuania: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/cap-analysis/>.



project and smart village strategies will be a key task of the EU (and national) CAP Network(s) in the future, especially from 2025 onwards, when most Smart Villages interventions are expected to start.

- Future EU work on Smart Villages **in the context of EIP-AGRI**, can also build on the **Smart Rural 27 analytical work of the CAP Strategic Plans**. However, it is important to emphasise that the EIP-AGRI intervention – with the exception of Austria⁴⁹ – has not yet been mobilised to directly support rural development and/or Smart Villages. In this context, supporting Smart Villages through EIP-AGRI is still an unexploited area. **As a first step, it could be explored how far Member States use EIP-AGRI Cooperation interventions to support innovation in the wider rural development context (i.e. beyond agriculture)**. This can be the basis of raising awareness about the use of EIP-AGRI Cooperation intervention as a mechanism to support Smart Villages and innovation in the wider local rural development context. As the Analysis of Smart Villages within the CAP Strategic Plans demonstrated, **EIP-AGRI Operational Groups** could become one of the key mechanisms to implement Smart Villages in the future. An EIP-AGRI EU Focus Group could explore how this could most effectively be achieved. Multi-actor collaboration and interactive innovation are key features of Smart Villages, and therefore the use of EIP-AGRI Operational Groups both in the context of **smart agriculture and in the context of wider smart rural development** is highly relevant. **The use of digital technologies in Smart Villages solutions** is another relevant topic that is worth exploring further.
- Future **thematic work on 'evaluation'** could also cover the Smart Villages aspect in order to contribute to the effective evaluation of Smart Villages interventions and to draw lessons for future planning. This **thematic work** could build on the Smart Rural 27 Analytical work on **Smart Villages within the CAP Strategic Plans**, with focus on 'Achieving the R40 (Number of Smart Village Strategies) & other relevant indicators. Furthermore, specific tools on monitoring Smart Village strategies have also been developed by the Smart Rural 21 project⁵⁰. More specifically technical guidelines (similar to those prepared by DG AGRI on EIP-AGRI and LEADER⁵¹) are needed on 'How to

⁴⁹ See findings of the MA Stakeholder Platform Meeting (Report, p. 8) https://www.smartrural27.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/MA_event_report_final.pdf.

⁵⁰ Monitoring Smart Village Strategies: <https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-step/monitoring/>.

⁵¹ Like the 'Guidelines for data on EIP-AGRI Operational Groups' (DG AGRI, 2023). Source: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/2cfcdf92-5401-4603-a79e-6c2e016e476e_en?filename=guidelines-for-data-on-eip-operational-groups_en.pdf or the 'Guidelines for data on LEADER' (DG AGRI, 2024). Source: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9daf0700-c38a-4946-a587-090e342e0306_en?filename=guidelines-for-data-on-leader-interventions_en.pdf.



achieve and measure the R.40 indicator (on number of smart village strategies)? and how to assess Smart Villages implementation⁵². This work can build on the evaluation experience of LEADER, at the same time distinguishing between LEADER and Smart Villages and highlighting the specific evaluation aspects of Smart Villages. Stakeholders within Managing Authorities need to be mobilised according to the way of programming of Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans: Member States with dedicated interventions and Member States that plan to implement Smart Villages through LEADER.

Various EU CAP Network support units (on Implementation, Innovation and Evaluation) could collaborate on the Smart Villages topic and thematic work needs to be planned in collaboration among the support units, lessons from one being taken up by the other. Furthermore, the EU CAP Network could collaborate with other EU structures and support mechanisms, in particular the Rural Pact that can help ensure the uptake of Smart Villages in other EU policies.

The menu of possible support activities include:

- **Dedicated thematic groups and focus groups**, concentrated on specific stakeholder groups and/or specific themes;
- **Dedicated events on Smart Villages or dedicated sessions within larger events**, such as EU CAP Network conferences, workshops and trainings. For instance, Smart Villages has relevance for LEADER, EIP-AGRI, other cooperation interventions (e.g. short supply chains) and other relevant CAP Strategic Plan interventions (e.g. rural entrepreneurship, smart agriculture, tourism, infrastructural investments).
- **Dedicated presentations** within events, e.g. in governance sub-groups and national CAP Network meetings.

Future events need to go beyond generic discussions about Smart Villages and should focus on **practical implementation aspects** (like the Smart Rural 27 activities within the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory). CAP Networks can continue the work of Smart Rural 27 taskforces (or use the taskforce model) when planning Smart Villages support actions (this is already happening in some countries).

The future European CAP Regulation could directly reference Smart Villages support among the mandatory activities of the CAP Networks.

⁵² This guidance is prepared based on the CAP Plan Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 and the implementing act supplementing this Regulation (Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2022/1475). Similar provisions – that allow the preparation of EU guidance - are needed in the context of Smart Villages.



III.3 CALL FOR MULTI-FUNDED SMART VILLAGES

3.3.1 Ensuring multi-funding for Smart Villages

Smart Villages is a multi-funded concept. As it was stated in the Outreach Strategy of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory, *"Smart Villages are to be supported by several policies, and it is one of the key goals of the Pilot Observatory to raise awareness about – and possibly advance the implementation of Smart Villages in other – than the CAP, especially Cohesion Policy - context. Within the CAP Network, other policies might get less attention and might become less engaged in the process."*

Although it is formally and explicitly programmed (R.40 indicator) only through the CAP Regulation, it is expected that other EU funds and programmes should also support Smart Villages strategies and initiatives as set out in the initial Action Plan for Smart Villages by the EU in 2017. The CAP analysis of the Smart Rural 27 project covered an overview of other programmes that could support Smart Villages, based both on the information provided in the CAP on synergies and complementarities with other programmes, as well as the national experts' own research and knowledge. The results of the analysis showed **that no other dedicated programmes or interventions⁵³ within other EU programmes seem to support directly Smart Villages.**

MA interviews also explored cooperation between different ministries/ managing authorities at the national level on the Smart Villages topic. **In most of the Member States there is no cooperation mechanisms on the Smart Villages topic** among different authorities.

Nevertheless, there are some positive examples of inter-ministerial cooperation. For instance in Cyprus the CAP MA has cooperated closely with Deputy Ministry of Research, Innovation and Digital Policy and the Directorate General Growth, Ministry of Finance in the frame of Smart Rural 27 Taskforce. In the Czech Republic the smart territorial development concepts, including Smart Villages are mainly promoted by the Ministry of Regional Development.

One of the key recommendations of the Smart Rural 27 project has been to better engage other funds to support Smart Villages, e.g. through dedicated inter-ministerial taskforces or thematic groups at national level or structured discussions with a focus on Smart Villages among various Directorates General (DGs) in the European Commission.

⁵³ Except for Czechia where Smart Villages are supported under the same framework as Smart Cities.



To widen the multi-funded approach to Smart Villages, the process can start with **creating a dialogue and raising awareness among relevant authorities about the concept of Smart Villages**. The aim is to align various programmes (including possibly smart cities and smart villages – for instance some rural towns that are engaged in smart cities initiatives might also be engaged in the smart villages concept). Other funds managing bodies – especially Cohesion Policy – should be made aware of the potential of Smart Villages as an ideal tool for promoting local territorial development and ‘rural-proofing’ their public policies. Dedicated inter-ministerial working groups need to be created for this purpose. A good example is Finland, where the CAP MA is collaborating with other government ministries within the Finnish Rural Policy Council.

At the same time there is a **need for awareness-raising about the funding opportunities offered by other funds** among rural communities and LAGs. A systematic review and making information available on funding opportunities at regional and national levels (e.g. through repository, timetable of calls, etc.) – similar to the Rural Toolkit initiated at the EU level – for local rural communities to finance Smart Villages type initiatives would be beneficial.⁵⁴

There is a need **for a supportive policy framework across multiple funds and DGs**. Other EU programmes – and national, regional, private and community funds – should be mobilised for the implementation of Smart Villages.

While the process can be initiated from the national level (like it is happening in Czechia) according to the shared management of programmes between the European Commission and the Member States; there should be stronger further guidance and incentives from the European Commission towards Managing Authorities – especially of Cohesion Policy – to include rural development support, and more specifically Smart Villages support in their programmes. Smart Villages can become an effective policy instrument both for community-led local development and for supporting territorial development in rural regions and strengthen the functional relationships between urban and rural areas.

The future regulation on Cohesion Policy Regulation should contain clear reference and requirements to support the concept of Smart Villages in synergies with the CAP. This requires more intensive dialogue on Smart Villages between DG AGRI, DG REGIO, DG EMPL and other DGs (such as MOVE and CLIMA) in preparation for the post-2027 programming period; as well as dialogue at the national/ regional level among managing authorities of various EU and national programmes.

⁵⁴ At the European level a similar initiative is the planned Rural Toolkit initiative of the European Commission’s Joint Research Centre (JRC) - [Toolkit \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/jrc/en/rural-toolkit).



3.3.2 Vertical alignment of different levels of strategies

Aligned with the multi-level and multi-funded approach of Smart Villages, it is **important to vertically align the different strategies from the local, through the regional/ national to the European levels**, and create support to link these multi-governance levels. For instance, it is important to create synergies between LAG strategies and local smart village strategies, especially if these are supported under the LEADER intervention. Similarly, smart village strategies supported from regional programmes should ideally be aligned with regional smart strategies (including Smart Specialisation Strategies) that should consider the needs of smaller rural communities, especially in regionalised countries. **This is to ensure that the interests of small rural communities are considered when planning regional goals and strategies.** Several rural communities also expressed that it would be crucial to better connect to the regional level and receive support, especially in thematic areas that are not “stopping at the border of the village” (such as rural mobility).

Smart Rural examples include Ostana’s (Italy) effort to collaborate with the Piemonte region, Stanz’s (Austria) effort to cooperate with the Styrian government⁵⁵, and the work of the Central Region in Portugal to better integrate the concept and support for Smart Villages within their regional strategies⁵⁶.

Furthermore, **better synergies could be created between urban and rural areas** (including smart cities and smart villages initiatives - for instance, it needs to be better explored how far certain tested technological solutions could be applied also in the rural context⁵⁷). This is particularly important due to the **functional links** between urban areas/ cities and surrounding rural areas, at the same time mitigating the competition between the two types of areas. This is particularly true in countries where rural areas are very close to urban areas.

3.3.3 Synergies with the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas & the Rural Pact

Smart Villages represents a strong commitment towards the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas, in particular as it highlights the importance of joint commitment and efforts of various stakeholders, sectors, policies and funds towards community-led rural / territorial development.

⁵⁵ See for instance session on ‘*Linking bottom-up Smart Villages approaches to LEADER local development strategies & regional strategies*’ during the 2nd Smart Villages Observatory meeting: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/2nd-smart-village-pilot-observatory-meeting/>.

⁵⁶ See taskforce work in Portugal: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/>.

⁵⁷ Czechia works on creating synergies between the smart urban and rural dimensions (a topic covered during 2nd Smart Villages Observatory). See further info: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/factsheet/czechia/>.



The **Smart Villages concept and the European Smart Villages Observatory could become a key instrument for realising the goals of the Rural Pact** that “provides a framework for cooperation between public authorities, civil society, businesses, academia and citizens, at the European, national, regional and local level. The Rural Pact contributes to achieving the shared goals of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas by facilitating interaction on rural matters. It aims at fostering mutual inspiration between all levels of governance and mobilise public authorities and stakeholders to act on the needs and aspirations of rural residents.” The Smart Rural projects and the Pilot Observatory have implemented several activities that resonate with the objectives of the Rural Pact such as (1) “Amplifying **rural voices and bring them higher on the political agenda**” (e.g. through closely engaging and giving voice to rural communities / villages including knowledge clusters, cross-visits and various events); (2) “**Structuring and enabling networking**, collaboration & mutual learning” (especially through the networking activities of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory). Furthermore, Smart Villages is gaining importance in the context of (3) “**voluntary commitments** to act for the vision”, among others a Rural Pact Community Group on Smart Villages has been initiated⁵⁸.

The Rural Pact is also calling for multi-funded support for rural areas and rural communities that is fully aligned with the principles of Smart Villages. Therefore, the Rural Pact Community can be one of the **most suitable networking platforms to encourage multi-funded bottom-up rural development approaches**.

3.3.4 Contribution of EU-funded (Horizon) projects

Furthermore, various programmes under direct management of the European Commission – such as Horizon Europe – should continue supporting the Smart Villages initiative. **It is important to share experience and create synergies between various projects and organisations that support Smart Villages** based on the legacy of the Smart rural projects.

Currently there are a number of ongoing projects related to Smart Villages, such as FUTURAL⁵⁹, RURACTIVE⁶⁰ and SMART ERA⁶¹. These projects are useful in

⁵⁸ https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/groups/community-group-smart-villages_en.

⁵⁹ “FUTURAL will prototype, test, and demonstrate community-led, social, technological, and business innovations in different geographical and socio-cultural rural contexts. It will deliver a set of digital Smart Solutions to address key societal, environmental, and financial challenges and empower rural communities to engage in change.” (Source: <https://futural-project.eu/>).

⁶⁰ RURACTIVE consortium “will develop smart, community-led, tailor-made, place-based and inclusive solutions in 12 pilot cases around Europe to drive a just and sustainable transition of rural areas.” (Source: <https://www.ruractive.eu/>).

⁶¹ SMART ERA (Smart Community-led transition for Europe’s Rural Areas) “an innovative EU-funded project, is set to breathe new life into rural landscapes through smart innovation packages (SIPs).” (Source: <https://smartera-project.eu/>).

supporting the implementation of pilot actions to demonstrate the value of the Smart Villages concept for rural communities. At the same time **it is important to create direct linkages between these EU projects (under direct management) and the EU's policymaking processes** (with regard to programmes under shared management), i.e. to follow closely and draw lessons from these projects for future EU policies under shared management (such as the CAP and Cohesion Policy).

III.4 CONTINUING THE SMART VILLAGES OBSERVATORY

Policy networks and projects – like the Preparatory Action Smart Rural 27 – have strong added value in advancing (novel) policy instruments, such as Smart Villages. **The Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects provided a solid basis and framework for EU support to Smart Villages** from the local (rural community) level, through national level, to the European policymaking level. It is important to draw lessons from these actions and create continuity of support as the Smart Villages concept needs further strengthening.

3.4.1 Continuation of the Pilot Observatory's work in the context of the CAP

The European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory has created a valuable platform for exchange. The continuity of the exchanges for more effective implementation of Smart Villages within the CAP is important. In terms of stakeholder engagement, the members⁶² of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory could be further mobilised at all levels, including:

- Local rural communities/ municipalities;
- LEADER LAGs;
- Regional authorities;
- National CAP Networks;
- Managing Authorities of CAP Strategic Plans;
- Managing authorities/ ministries managing other funds/ programmes;
- National LEADER Associations;
- National Village Associations;
- Other relevant stakeholder organisations and networks at national and European levels.

The structure and three pillars of the Observatory could be mirrored in future activities, including those of the EU and national CAP Networks. While national CAP Networks' activities could build on the lessons learnt from National Smart Rural 27 taskforces' work, the EU CAP Network activities could mostly follow

⁶² Note that there is no formal membership of the Observatory, however, the comprehensive list of stakeholders who participated in various exchanges is provided.

the logic of the EU Stakeholder Platforms (set up for LEADER Stakeholders, CAP Managing Authorities, CAP Networks and EU stakeholder organisations). Finally, engaging local level stakeholders is also possible at the European level, with focus on facilitating international exchange and cooperation among rural communities and LAGs.

When it comes to more technical aspects and implementation of Smart Villages under the CAP, **it is worthwhile to consider thematic groups that bring together specific types of stakeholders with common interest/role** and/or create dedicated platforms for peer-to-peer exchange among the same types of stakeholders. This has been the logic applied in the context of the Pilot European Smart Villages Observatory, where the dedicated stakeholder platforms allowed more technical discussions on implementation aspects of Smart Villages (to respond to specific needs) rather than discussions on the concept in general (to respond to generic interest/ needs).

3.4.2 Networking beyond the CAP

While CAP Networks could potentially take on future support roles, they primarily focus on CAP policy implementation, and within that many other CAP themes, often dominated by agricultural issues. This might risk losing focused and targeted support on Smart Villages; as well as the engagement of other funds in supporting Smart Villages might also be at risk.

In order to strengthen Smart Villages programming, **dedicated Smart Villages platforms/ networks would be needed**. Such platforms have been tested within the Smart Rural 27 project at all levels in the framework of the European Pilot Smart Villages Observatory. It is important to **create continuity in this support** as the Smart Villages concept needs further strengthening.

Strong **political commitment and European-level support is required** by EU institutions (including the European Parliament and the European Commission). Ideally, a **cross-fund, pan-European Policy Platform** could be set up to support Smart Villages, with the active engagement of both CAP and other EU policy stakeholders. Synergies of such platform can be created with the Long Term Vision for Rural Areas and the Rural Pact. In particular, the Rural Pact Community and related Community Platforms (including the Smart Villages Platform), could be capitalised on to establish a multi-faceted support and create exchange opportunities on Smart Villages. **The future European Smart Villages Observatory** (i.e. a pan-European Policy Network) **could support the preparation of the post-2027 policy-framework** that is inclusive of Smart Villages.

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