



## WORKSHOP REPORT OF WORKSHOP SERIES 1

### When is digital technology becoming a ‘game changer’ in improving local services? (1/1)



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## TITLE OF WORKSHOP: When is digital technology becoming a 'game changer' in improving local services? (1/1)

Facilitator/ Rapporteur: Pat Kennedy, eTownz, E40 National Expert

Notetaker: Sarah Peter, Institute for Rural Development Research (IfLS)

### BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

The session explored how to decide whether digital is the right solution for a rural community, and how to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of making digital technologies 'game changers' in local service provision, such as economies of scale and planning jointly with the community. There is a wide agreement that digital technology is a key tool for the implementation of the Smart Villages concept and is one of the most promising opportunities for rural areas in the 21st century. On the surface, many digital technologies appear 'self-evidently' to have a high utility value for improving basic services for rural communities. This can sometimes lead to a tendency to see the problem as requiring just a 'digital tool' to enable addressing such challenges. The reality, in many cases, is quite different. Often, technology unfolds its full potential only in conjunction with human services, whether provided on a voluntary basis or in form of paid services.

### PRESENTATIONS

**Marcos António Nogueira, (Project Coordinator of the AURORAL Horizon 2020 Project): [Technologies for Smart Communities and AURORAL middleware](#)**

The presentation introduced the Horizon 2020 AURORAL project (Architecture for Unified Regional and Open Digital Ecosystems for Smart Communities and Rural Areas Large Scale Application) and the core principles of its approach, i.e. co-development and interoperability, ecosystem and empowerment. Starting from a smaller number of thematic pilot regions and cross-domain demonstrators, the ultimate objective is to include 100 European regions in a digital ecosystem by 2030, bridging various vertical and horizontal services as well as digital marketplaces in rural domains such as tourism, farming, health, energy and mobility. At this, AURORAL's so-called 'middleware' serves as a broker. An overall ambition is to help overcoming the rural-urban digital divide and improve quality of life in rural areas.

The speaker underlined the need for an integrated cross-thematic approach instead of addressing single topics (in the sense of thematic 'silos', also going along with a 'silo' structure of responsible organisations/bodies, e.g. lack of exchange between the EU Commission's DG Regio and DG Connect). He also emphasised the aspect of scale/critical mass, i.e. the need for local communities to unite and thus gain power. At this, smart communities weren't defined as 'villages' only, but rural areas in a wider sense. Moreover, **enabling a common technological basis** for sharing digital solutions across regions was named as a vital point. Further technological issues beyond (barriers to) interoperability were pointed out, including data security/transparency, and lack of connectivity.

**Lutz Kubitschke (Empirica): Lessons from the Smart Rural 21 project – [How to co-design digital e-services with rural communities](#)**

Summarising some lessons learned from the Smart Rural 21 project, the speaker demonstrated how building digital support services can be helpful if they are understood as being embedded in human services, and if the implementation is pursued as part of a ‘journey’ beyond the mere establishment of a ‘digital tool’. This journey comprises an iterative cycle of strategy building, the implementation planning of the digital projects (including ambition focusing, maturity assessment covering a multi-stakeholder self-assessment, and operational planning), and self-evaluation. The central topic was finding solutions to enable an ageing population to continue leading an independent life in their rural communities – covering social care, health care, housing and beyond. Experiences from three Smart Villages (Dingle/IE, Penela/PT and Sollstedt/DE) provided the empirical background. The presentation concluded that digital services require considerable efforts and preconditions, such as a certain scale to ensure economic sustainability, safeguarding long-term commitment, and awareness of the limitations to replicability in other contexts. That is, before the actual implementation of an e-service can start, there are numerous questions to be solved, including a common problem understanding and common language of the multiple stakeholders concerned.



The speaker emphasised that technology alone will not be sufficient as a solution, but will only work in conjunction with human services, or – in other words – within a wider ‘organisational belt of support’.

**Juan Manuel Velasco Leons, (DG AGRI): [The relevance of the work of the Broadband Competence Office\(s\) for Smart Villages](#)**

The presentation provided an overview of the roles of the European Broadband Competence Offices (BCOs) in the Member States, whose objective is to support capacity-building for countries and regions to ensure access of citizens to high-speed broadband. BCOs are composed of national- and regional-level public authorities in charge of broadband deployment, their task is to provide advice on technological, legal and financial issues related to broadband to policy-makers, citizens and project promoters. This includes, for instance, broadband mapping in order to identify needs, developing and sharing innovative aid schemes, and cross-border exchange on good practices. In fulfilling their role, the BCOs themselves are supported by the European BCO Network. The presentation included also some statistical figures and overviews of broadband coverage across Europe, highlighting the rural-urban divide and the situation of remote areas.



The speaker highlighted the need for good broadband connectivity (a ‘highway’) as precondition for digital technology to become a ‘game-changer’. At this, in rural areas, the ‘last mile’ to households was named as a key point. Confirming statements by the other two speakers, he agreed that digital solutions cannot be adapted 1:1 from one context to another, and that it is key to make sure that solutions are sustainable (and not just a case of fading initial euphoria).

## FINDINGS ON CHALLENGES

Some of the key challenges

The **most important challenges** highlighted during the discussion included:

- Thematic/ sectoral & organisational **silos** (e.g. lack of exchange between the EU Commission's DG Regio and DG Connect)
- **Lack of digital skills** to be able to use e-services. Specific target group analysis is needed to understand the gaps in skills.
- **Financing**, there is no joint cross-regional/cross-border financial funding available.
- The **EU Commission is too passive as concerns the**



**monitoring of the use of broadband funds** by Member States. In this respect, there is 'total inequality' between urban and rural areas in Member States (lack of access to services, education etc.). There are common standards needed across the EU. 'Subsidiarity does not apply to injustice!' Urban and rural areas have the same right to services, but there are **no services without investment and political will**.

## FINDINGS ON SOLUTIONS

Key discussion points (including solutions) included:

- In terms of technology, **cross-thematic transferability** is needed. **AURORAL 'middleware'** provide the architecture for a unified technology. 'Multi-interoperability', i.e. vertical and horizontal (sectoral and spatial) is key. Technology needs to converge on a common business model to cover various sectors (e.g. culture, health care etc.).
- A 'service' is not understood merely as a 'digital app', but **the app is only one element** in the context of a wider overall service. The app is just a tool in the framework of a 'human service belt'.
- Experience shows that **elderly persons are motivated to learn** if they think a digital solution will help them. Skills are thus less of an issue.
- There are common goals set and finances provided, but **Member States need to use the financial resources properly**.
- **Scalability** has crystallised as a key point to achieve rural and urban smartness across the EU.

*"Digital is not the solution, but without digital, there will be no solution."*

*Marcos António Nogueira*

## SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, NEXT STEPS

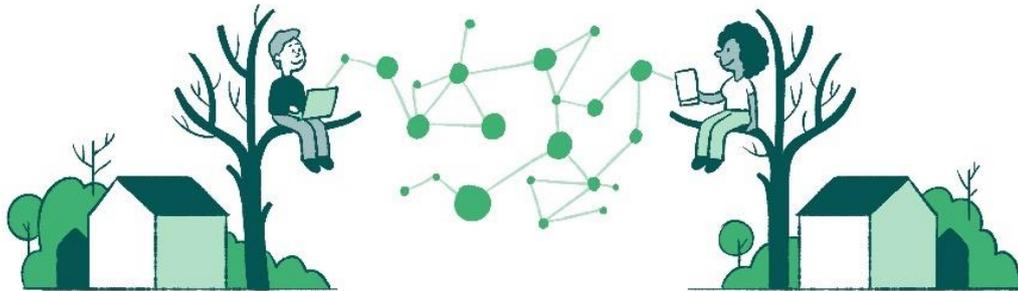
Key message delivered at the plenary:

‘Digital is not the sole solution, but without digital there will be no solution.’ (Marcos António Nogueira)

Key messages from the discussion can be summarised as follows

- There is a need for an **integrated cross-thematic approach** instead of addressing single topics. That is, thematic ‘silos’ (focusing on e.g. mobility, health, culture separately) as well as organisational ‘silo’ structures need to be broken up.
- **Scalability** to achieve economically sustainable rural and urban smartness across the EU: this requires a common technological basis for sharing digital solutions across regions (interoperability). There is a range of further technological issues such as data security/transparency, and lack of connectivity.
- It is not just about putting a digital solution in place, but a more **comprehensive process needs to be considered: Before the actual implementation** of an e-service, numerous questions need to be solved (including a common problem understanding and common language of the multiple stakeholders concerned), and **long-term sustainability and commitment** need to be safeguarded (beyond ‘initial euphoria’, taking into account the limitations of volunteer commitment).
- It needs to be considered that there are **limitations to the replicability** of digital services in other contexts.
- **Digital technology alone will not be sufficient as a solution**, but will only work in conjunction with human services, or – in other words – within a wider ‘organisational belt of support’ (e.g. in health care).
- The issue of **broadband connectivity as precondition for digital technology to become a ‘game-changer’** is unresolved yet in many rural regions. At this, in rural areas, the ‘last mile’ to households is named as a key point.
- The use of **funding provided for broadband connectivity** needs to be monitored more closely by the EU Commission in order to **overcome the remaining inequality between urban and rural areas** in Member States.
- Policy is not responding to the fact that there are **cross-border regions and different regions across Member States that are facing common challenges**: the problem is that there is **no joint cross-regional/cross-border financial funding available**.

WHEN IS **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY** BECOMING A  
'GAME-CHANGER' IN IMPROVING **LOCAL SERVICES**?



With help of a scalable digital ecosystem  
the delivery of human service can be substantially improved across EU.



FINAL CONFERENCE OF THE  
**SMART RURAL 21 PROJECT**

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