WORKSHOP REPORT OF WORKSHOP SERIES 2

Exploring new networking approaches to support Smart Villages (2/4)

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Discussant: Salla Patila, Finnish Network Support Unit

Notetaker: Veneta Paneva, E40 Communications

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE SESSION

National Rural Networks (future CAP Networks) can play a key role in improving the policy framework under the CAP and facilitating the process around Smart Villages, including through exchange among stakeholders about smart ideas and capacity building. Several NRN Support Units have got engaged in a series of activities, such as organising Smart Villages events, village competitions and awards, capacity building and communicating key messages on Smart Villages. This session presented the activities of two frontrunner NRNs – Poland and Wallonia, Belgium – and allowed a joint reflection on what networks can do in the future to better enable Smart Villages.
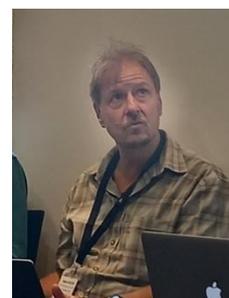
PRESENTATIONS

Paweł Krzeczunowicz, Polish Network Support Unit: [Rural Network Support activities on Smart Villages - Poland & Wallonia](#)

Rural challenges in Poland include depopulation, ageing, digital exclusion and digital infrastructure issues. The Polish NRN has been involved in and organised various activities to communicate on and build capacities of different actors on the topic of Smart Villages since 2017, including: participation in the ENRD Thematic Group; events and training for LAGs and other actors; national competitions; [research publication with example case studies and recommendations](#). The NRN action has been based on learning (about the SV concept and the situation in the country on the basis of a nation-wide competition); sharing (events bringing stakeholders together and support to European Rural Parliament discussion of the concept); and training (online).

Xavier Delmon, Walloon Network Support Unit: [Rural Network Support activities on Smart Villages - Poland & Wallonia](#)

Rural challenges in Wallonia include accelerating the digital transformation (digital divide) and improving territorial balances between towns and the countryside. The Walloon NRN has been involved in and organised various activities to communicate on and build capacities of different actors on the topic of Smart Villages since 2017, including: participation in the ENRD Thematic Group; promotion of smart actions of two provinces; events; consolidation of collaboration with Digital Wallonia (regional agency); set-up of a 'smart'

taskforce to analyse needs and challenges of rural areas, formulate recommendations, identify good practices – on a wide range of themes.

KEY QUESTIONS

- **Finnish Network Support Unit** (Salla Patila): gave a brief overview of past and future activities of the NRN in relation to Smart Village actions. These include:
  - The Smartest village in Finland competition (2018-2020) aimed at identifying the state-of-play of villages and the situation on the ground. It started off with 33 villages, went on with 17 mid-way, concluded with 5 finalists and 1 winner; brought a lot of good media coverage to the finalists – in the national, regional & local news.
  - The NRN participated in the ENRD Thematic Group (TG) on Smart Villages and ran two consecutive TGs of its own.
  - In the future programming period, Smart Villages will have its own funding allocated within the **cooperation framework and under LEADER**. Partnership will be at the heart of the funding: at least two partners will need to take part in projects (Ministry/Managing Authority level).
  - The NRN plans to bring together all projects that have a Smart Village label together to network; villages that are not yet funded will also come together in coffee sessions (monthly or every two months) to explore how they can move forward.
  - A second round of the Smartest village in Finland competition is anticipated towards the end of the programming period.
  - A virtual platform including networking tools & a project database has been developed – the idea is for this to become a key networking tool for (smart) villages & the people behind the projects.
- **What are networks' future plans, starting from next year?**
  - **Poland**: future plans depend on how the Strategic Plan has been written; the LEADER intervention has a Smart Village mention to enable future actions: 88 out of 300 LAGs have decided to participate in this and have Smart Village concepts developed. This is expected to result in 700 concept papers, generating a pool of ideas for the next steps – mobilising investment funding, under the investment measure, in all 16 Polish provinces to implement smart solutions within those concepts.

    There has been a lot of discussions whether such lighthouse projects are effective and this will be the Ministry's way of testing if this is what is needed or not. The implications for the NRN are to continue trainings for LAGs to help them move through the stages of this process and popularise the Smart Villages concept.

    Additionally, LEADER multi-funding has been very successful in Poland, while in the previous period 2 out of 16 provinces implemented it, in the next one, there will be 10 out of 16 to do it. Multi-funding could be a significant driver for Smart Villages.
  - **Wallonia**: there are two upcoming calls: 1. for projects supported by regional funds – the NRN to support municipalities in the drafting of proposals and 2. for LAG applications on digitalisation and Smart Villages – LAGs are starting to integrate a Smart Village dimension into their LDSs – the NRN will support LAGs in the implementation of their strategies. Additionally, there is a specific body in Wallonia that is in charge of providing training on the concept of 'smart' – the NRN intends to work jointly with it.

- ▪ **What other NRNs are doing?**
  - o **Estonian NRN** (Meeri Maastik): the network disseminates information in English on how other countries (LV, FI and PL) support Smart Villages through its webinar series; it organises events and trainings for LAGs and villages on boosting innovation; it launched a LEADER cooperation project providing help and mentoring support to villages running pilot projects.
  - o **Italian NRN** (Mara Lai): the new Strategic Plan will include both support under LEADER and a specific Smart Village intervention; LAGs will be able to participate as project partners as long as they do not have Smart Villages as part of their strategies; the NRN organises trainings on how to prepare smart strategies and would like to help identify funding for those projects, but sometimes there is no critical mass of people (or infrastructure) to carry out such activities.

  > *"If we have these strategies, we want to help them find funding, even if it's from private associations, to work out different solutions. Money now and not in two years' time when the first calls will be published by the regions."*
  >
  > *Mara Lai, Italian NRN*

MAIN DISCUSSION POINTS: DILEMMAS, QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

- ▪ As the Smart Villages concept is growing and maturing, there will soon be a need to start capturing its impact – **have there been any indicators identified and set up yet? How do we measure success**, as more and more money starts getting poured into the implementation of the concept? Are there any benchmarks yet? Is anyone already working on that? (Rigas Zafeiriou, Kythera, Greece)

  - o **Finnish NRN** (Salla Patila): the following steps, after the Smart Villages projects take place and following the implementation of investment in Smart Villages ('attached indicators') – an IT system (a virtual platform 'huura') is envisaged to be built in such a way as to trace the impact of investment.
  - o **Polish NRN** (Paweł Krzeczunowicz): there has been a report by the European Court of Auditors on the added value of LEADER. The same would apply to Smart Villages - it is a new concept, the digital dimension has made it more modern, compared to 'rural development', it has given rise to the name, and a lot of experience and know-how should be gained from the digital dimension.

- ▪ Who is lobbying for rural in Brussels, at the EU level, **to get more funding for this type of Smart Village projects?** (Anna Bíró Hungarian NRN)
  - o **Polish NRN** (Paweł Krzeczunowicz): it is the EU Commission with its **long-term vision for rural areas**. Three Commissioners are involved, this breaks the silo – and the document looks at population, democracy, agriculture and digital

  > *"With multi-funding [...] could be a motor for developing Smart Villages beyond the funding that is made specifically available through the Common Agricultural Policy and the Strategic Plan."*
  >
  > *Paweł Krzeczunowicz, Polish NRN*

development. The Commission has also launched the **Rural Pact** which is work in progress, but for all of it to work, national governments have to make it work. For example, the Austrian Strategic Plan is more and more focused on rural development. Therefore, the **main lobbying needs to be done at the national level.**

Additionally, there are five organisations (on environment, rural communities, village communities, rural development) that work together within the **European Rural Parliament** at the EU level as a counter lobby to the agricultural lobby in Brussels.
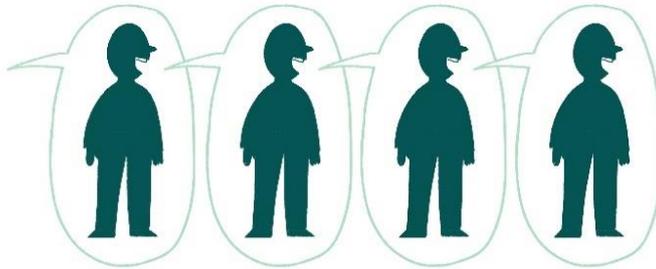
o European Commission (Juan-Manuel Velasco-Leon): every time there is a European Commission legislative proposal, from any Commissioner, it is subjected to **a rural proofing** test – rural concerns are taken on board, there are checks and balances to make sure that the rural flag is waving.

▪ What is the **existing capacity of (smart) villages to become smarter**, to access funds, especially when it comes to multi-funding? They need external expertise, skills, capacity for writing applications. (Rigas Zafeiriou, Kythera, Greece)

o Italian NRN (Mara Lai): **villages most often do not have the capacity**, nor skills, they do not know how to write applications; even if they manage to write the applications and win the projects, they do not have enough manpower to manage the projects. NRNs cannot solve that issue for municipalities but can only highlight it to the central government for them to address.

o Italy (Piero Brunod): it could be interesting to switch from a local authority to a network of local actors that are somehow responsible for local development. Local governments in rural areas are changing quickly (every three-four years), a more flexible system is needed, including private actors, municipality, and civil society (like in France) – this could be the added value of a smart rural village.

KEY MESSAGE & NEXT STEP

Key message delivered at the plenary:

Rural Networks' task is to bring people together, the difficulty is to reach all the way to the village, so intermediary actors are needed to get in touch with the villages.