Summary Report of the Introductory Mee□ng of the

e-Service Knowledge Cluster

PRESENTATIONS

Edina Ocsko (Project Coordinator) presented an overview of the Smart Rural 27 project, including the purpose of the European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory and the role of the knowledge cluster plays in this context:

- The overall objective of the Smart Rural 27 project is "to prepare Member States and rural communities for the implementation of the CAP post-2020, as well as other policies and initiatives, which could potentially support the emergence of Smart Villages across Europe".
- The Smart Villages Pilot Observatory has three pillars, one of which is the knowledge cluster of rural communities. The other two are national / regional Smart Villages Taskforces, and European-level stakeholder platforms.
- Knowledge Cluster members have been engaged at three levels: lighthouse communities, learning communities and follower communities.

Lutz Kubitschke (empirica) presented a brief overview of the local communities participating in the e-Service Knowledge Cluster, thereby relying on selected information collected during the application process:

- Beyond the two light house communities Overnhausen (Germany) and Lormes (France) which had been identified earlier in the project, 25 further communities applied for participating in the e-Service Knowledge Cluster. All in all, 15 countries are represented in the Cluster.
- The Knowledge Cluster includes communities of quite different sizes, ranging from small municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants up to large municipalities with more than 10,000 inhabitants.
- The participating communities can also be characterised by different geographical features. About one third are located in mountainous areas. Others are in coastal areas or on an island. About one third have no specific geographical characteristics indicated in the application process.
- Most of the communities are taking a strategic approach towards local development. About one third do not yet have an explicitly stated local development strategy of vision.
- The specific challenges faced by the communities vary on case-by-case basis. Socio-demographic challenges are evident, for example, in the form of an ageing local population and/or out-migration of younger people. Economic challenges arise, for example, from a lack of employment opportunities and long commutes to work. Quality-of-life related challenges include difficulties in maintaining local services of public interest, such as health care or education. In practice, however, different challenges are often interlinked.

Following the introductory presentations, the two lighthouse communities Lormes (France) and Ovenhausen (Germany) presented their villages and their approach to harnessing digital solutions for local development purpose. You can listen to the presentation of Lormes and the presentation of Ovenhausen.

DISCUSSION

Questions to the two communities & beyond

Q: **Village App** launched in Ovenhausen - How many people do currently use the App, and how do you motivate the people to make use of it?

A1 (Ovenhausen): We started in 2019 with 80 people who were interested in using our village App called "Dorffunk" ("Village Broadcast"). Now we have 800 users, and we have 1050 inhabitants. So we can **reach each family** through the App within just one second. And from outside of the village, about 2000 users can look up posts from our village.

A2 (Ovenhausen): You can also use the App to look up what has been posted in **other villages nearby**. You do not live alone in the district, and it is useful to be able to see what the neighbour villages are doing. There is a lot of cooperation beyond the village, for example when it comes to soccer teams and other associations. People are sometimes saying: "We have WhatsApp and why do we need anything else?". In such cases, we respond that WhatsApp belongs to Meta, and I don't know whether I have to say much about user rights, algorithms and how Meta is using data coming from the suers. But our App can also be much easier downloaded, and registration is easier. But the most important argument is that there is no WhatsApp group called "Village". There are typically WhatsApp groups for colleagues, for the family or for friends. But if you want to know what's going on in the village you can only rely on the "DorfFunk" App. So **we don't have to compete with Meta**.

Q: You mentioned that people living in Ovenhausen can also get to know through the App what's going on in other villages. If I understand that correctly, it's not just an App for the village Ovenhausen, but a kind of **network App**. Is it for the villages nearby or for the district?

A1 (Ovenhausen): You can draw a **radius of 30 km**, and from there you can pick the villages from which you want to look up posts. And our idea for the future is that the Majors can send out messages they consider important through the App and every village gets the information right away. Therefore, we would like to roll out the App in the entire district. This is our goal for 2025.

A2 (Ovenhausen): There are **124 villages in the district,** and 30 of them adopted the App in the first step. Next week, 20 more will start using it. So we are expanding and offer the App to all villages, which can be used it free of charge.

A3 (Ovenhausen): The platform where the App is hosted is quite known by now. There are many regions in Germany starting to use the same concept, which means using the App for information sharing, bilateral communication and capacity building. We are very proud that we have become a **role model** at a very early stage of the development.

Q: Is this an App that is **widely available** or is this an App you have developed for your own region?

A (Ovenhausen): I think it's not available Europe-wide. The App has been developed by the Fraunhofer association, a non-commercial research institute, in the framework of a project entitled "digital villages". It does not belong to the main activities of the Fraunhofer institute. There is group of people within the institute taking care of the App. I don't think that they have the capacity to roll it out beyond Germany. I know that there are **similar solutions** available at the market from other distributors. In Switzerland there is, for example, a solution called crossiety. However, it does not interlink the App with a dedicated village website as in the case of "DorfFunk". But it's also a powerful village App.

Q: It is a problem as you say. We have various Face Book groups, WhatsApp groups and so forth in our community. And it is interesting to hear that you have an App where you are able to get a large number of the community to subscribe to, but which is much more under your **control**, and which is not part, as you say, of big international concern.

A (Ovenhausen): Yes, it is interesting that there is **no hate speech, no cyber mobbing,** and we believe that it has to do with the fact that, as a user, you are well known in your community. So there seems to be a certain level of social control, although not absolute control. But we haven't seen any bad behaviour yet.

Q: **Platform facilitating voluntary support** implemented in Lormes – Could you briefly explain how the platform works?

A1 (Lorme): It is a place where **anybody can learn** how to use a computer, how to use online booking or online shopping services and the like. There is also a free space where you can use a laser printer or a laser cutter. All in all, there are 12 people providing support. You can also rent an equipped office space. The team also provide on-site support at other places on demand.

A2 (Lorme): There is also a platform entitled "Faire Company". It has been set up to **support older people**. They can share their experiences and get voluntary support from others, e.g. on how to use a computer. But this platform is not working right now.

The most relevant topics

How to **effectively harness** digital technologies for the purposes of rural development emerged as the most prominent topic during the event. In this context, the following needs were identified as most relevant by the participants:

- Exchange of good practices
- Practical information on what works well and what doesn't.
- Approaches to promote digital solutions among the population.
- Methods and techniques for engaging people in a participatory co-development process.

Other aspects that came up during the discussion (see also image above):

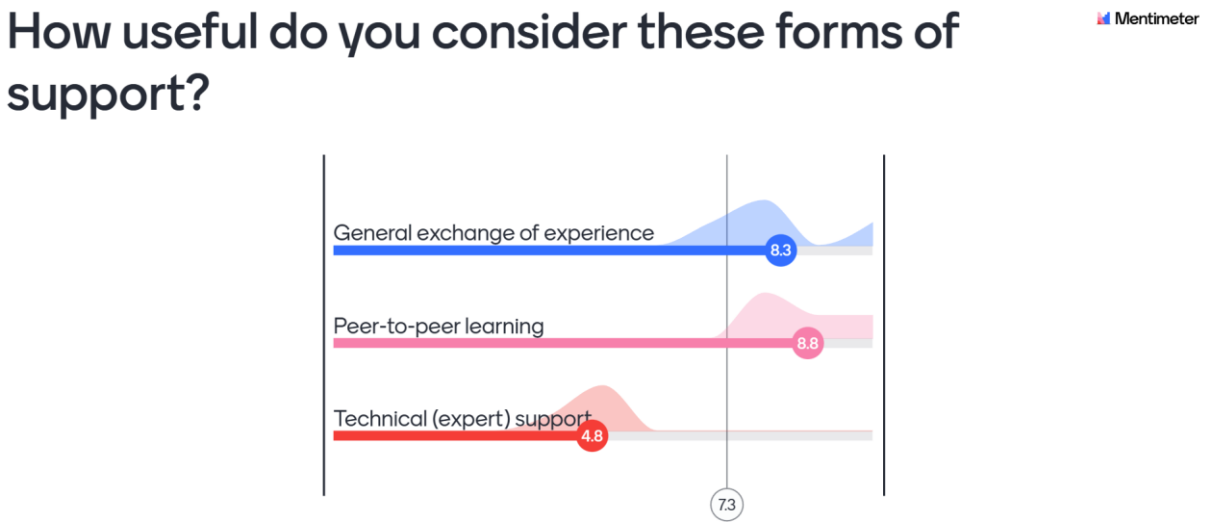
- There would be merit in trying to systematically identify **key success factors** when it comes harnessing digital solutions for addressing problems faced by rural communities.
- Diverse methods and techniques are principally available for co-developing ideas and maintain a participatory innovation process, such as mind maps. There is a lack of knowledge about the **range of methods and techniques** available today and on how to practically apply them in a specific local context.

Funded by the European Union

- There was general interest in learning what digital solutions other communities are already using. In a further step, there would be merit in **focusing on particular aspects** to better understand how such solutions might best be put into practice elsewhere.

The type of support that cluster community members would need

An initial survey was run to assess preference for communities for (1) peer-to-peer learning, (2) identification of funding sources, (3) technical expertise. The outcomes of the quick survey are presented below.



Peer-to-peer learning on specific topics and a general exchange of experiences were the most common needs. During the subsequent discussion further suggestions were made:

- A **staged learning process** was suggested: An overview of what others are doing could be followed by peer-to-peer learning on selected topics, again followed by targeted technical support.
- There would be merit in setting up a **digital platform** enabling direct exchange between cluster participants. This would, for example, enable to ask specific questions to other cluster members as they emerge.

NEXT STEPS

An initial plan for further cluster activities was presented. In this context, it was highlighted that the implementation of the currently planned activities will also depend on the needs and preferences of the cluster participants. The initial plan entails various steps which are planned to be further consolidated in collaboration with the cluster participants:

- Peer-to-peer learning opportunities are planned to be created through a series of smart café sessions (that are likely to be dedicated to specific digital service themes with presentations from relevant communities).
- Specialist expertise is planned to be engaged whenever relevant. Peer-to-peer exchanges will be targeted at rural communities to keep the informal nature of these sessions.
- The cluster is planned to closely work on specific digital service topics (during smart cafés and other sessions) with lighthouse and learning communities. Followers will also be invited to

selected online events. Other Observatory members (regional, national, European) will be regularly informed about the outcomes (through direct mailing/newsletters).

- It is planned that the profiles of the cluster members (with additional information on lighthouse and learning communities) will be uploaded on a geomapping tool. Cluster members will be tagged in the database to be able to search for their profiles.
- Cross-visits are planned to be organised to selected communities: (1) interest from potential lighthouse communities to host other communities will be assessed; (2) a short survey is planned to be run among cluster members on their interest to visit lighthouse communities; (3) based on the outcomes matchmaking will be made between communities (financing for travel costs provided as much as possible by the project).