

Report on 1st EU Stakeholders Platform session 'Supporting Smart Villages Through LEADER'

28 June 2023 10:00 – 12:00 CET
Online



Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Contract No:
AGRI-2020-0332

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1. Context

1.1. Purpose of the session

The first European Stakeholder Platform session 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.

Critical questions on 'How to programme Smart Villages within LEADER LDSs?', 'How to support local communities in becoming Smart Villages?' and 'What Managing Authorities and CAP Networks can do to enable a supportive policy environment for Smart Villages through LEADER?' were discussed during this session.

1.2. Target audience

The main target groups of this session were LEADER LAGs, LEADER Associations, CAP Managing Authorities and CAP Networks. The session was open also to local rural communities, LEADER enthusiasts and other stakeholders and organisations interested in Smart Village support through LEADER. Registration counted **157 participants from 24 Member States** (see Figure 1).

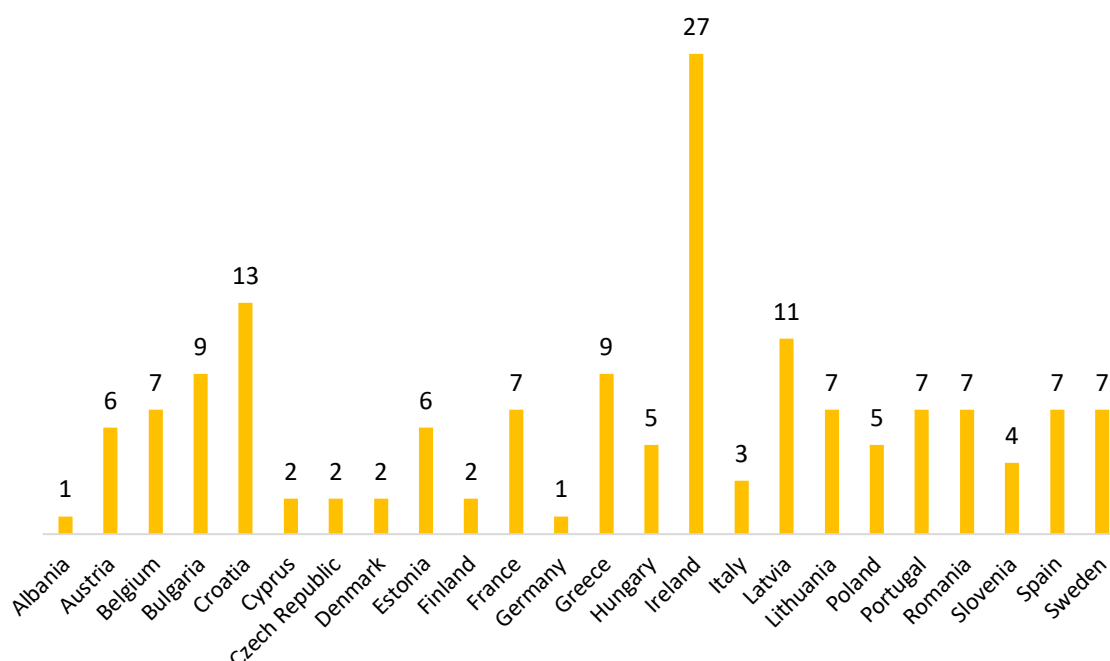


Figure 1, Participants by countries

Majority of participants (**78%**) represented the main target group: LEADER Local Action groups, LAEDER Associations, Managing Authorities and National CAP networks. Other interested stakeholders, like European and local level NGOs, researchers and communities or municipalities took part in the session (see Figure 2).

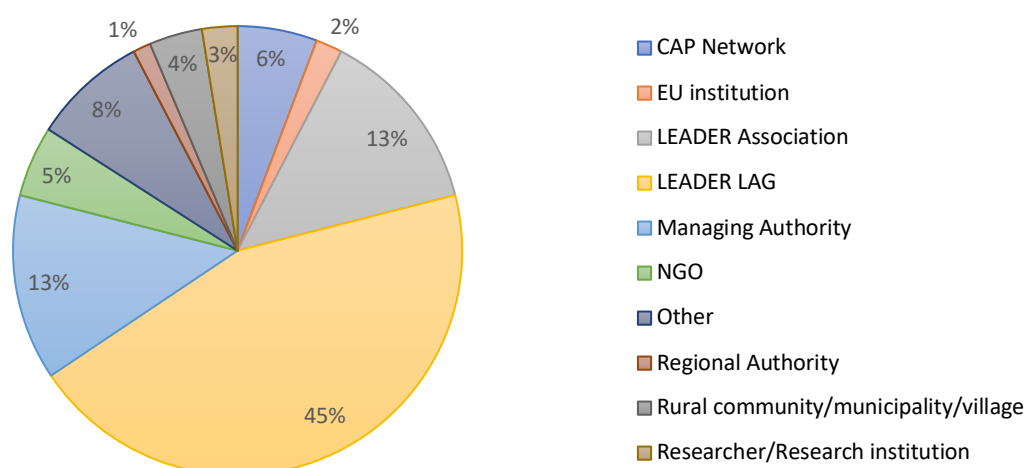


Figure 2, Type of stakeholders

1.3. Agenda

10.00 – 10.40: Introductory presentations – Sharing of the Smart Rural 27 experience

PRESENTATIONS
Introduction to the European LEADER Stakeholder Platform, outcomes of the LEADER & Smart Villages Survey and the purpose of the meeting , by <i>Edina Ocsko</i> (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)
An overview on how the concept of Smart Villages is programmed in the CAP Strategic Plans using the LEADER intervention , by <i>Katrina Idu</i> (E40, Smart Rural 27 Assistant Coordinator)
The experience of Austria: How the Austrian CAP is supporting Smart Villages through LEADER & Lessons from the Austrian Smart Rural 27 Taskforce , by <i>Michael Fischer</i> (Smart Rural 27 National Expert)
Sharing of practical ideas and recommendations of the Smart Rural 27 project on how to support Smart Villages through LEADER in practical terms (Smart Villages in LDSs) , by <i>Edina Ocsko</i> (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)

10.40 – 11.40: Group discussions on how to support Smart Villages through LEADER (click to read outcomes)

PRESENTATIONS
What LEADER LAGs can do: Initial experience of LEADER LAGs in programming Smart Villages: How to build capacity and support smart initiatives in rural communities through LEADER? WS1: by <i>Ieva Vītola-Deusa</i> , FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea (Latvia)
WS2 : by <i>Piotr Sadlocha</i> ,

What networks can do: How LEADER Associations / Networks and CAP Networks can support the emergence of Smart Villages through LEADER?

WS3 : **Support for Smart Villages through a recognition sign**, by Zane Seredina, Latvian Rural Forum

What Managing Authorities can do: How Managing Authorities can support LAGs in their efforts of supporting the emergence of Smart Villages at the local level?

WS4: Exchange of good practices and experiences between Managing Authorities from different member States.

11.40 – 12.00: Next steps & action points for the LEADER European Stakeholder Platform (see Conclusions)

2. Outcomes from the LEADER & Smart Villages sessions

2.1. Introductory presentations

2.1.1. Introduction to the European LEADER Stakeholder Platform, outcomes of the LEADER & Smart Villages Survey and the purpose of the meeting , by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)

First of all Edina introduced the Smart Rural 27 project goal and the Pilot European Smart Villages Observatory main components, starting from local level with Knowledge Clusters, going to national level with Taskforces and their focus on Smart Village policy changes and finally introducing the European level with Stakeholder Platforms, from which one of the platforms is the LEADER platform that was experimented in this session with the aim to provide support and information to interested stakeholders in programming and implementing Smart Villages through LEADER.

Then Edina shared the results of questionnaire that served as a registration form to the session, starting by an overview of the motivation of participants, that included, beneath others, the willingness to understand better the SV concept, learn from experiences of others and understand how to programme SV under LEADER. Then some findings about LAGs were shared, including that 89 % of present LAGs would like to plan and programme SV in their LDS. Some LAGs stated using thematic approach to smart villages, others do it through animation and capacity building e.g. by supporting SV strategy development. The questionnaire results have also shown that some of the Managing Authorities as next steps on supporting SV are planning to prepare guidance on SV implementation or plan do LDSs analysis. The role of CAP networks and LEADER Associations in supporting networking and cooperation was emphasised in the answers. Some of the networks have stated planning LAG support/training activities on SV.

It was highlighted that **the purpose of this meeting was to provide as much as possible with the clarity on what SVs are, without giving one approach on how implement SV, but more promoting the experience sharing in order to proceed to action in SV implementation.**

2.1.2. An overview on how the concept of Smart Villages is programmed in the CAP Strategic Plans using the LEADER intervention, by Katrina Idu (E40, Smart Rural 27 Assistant Coordinator)

Katrina presented preliminary results of CAP SP analysis on how Smart Villages are programmed in CAP SP especially through LEDAER intervention. The programming of SV is different in various Member States: (in some countries there is no mention or a vague mention of SV in CAP SP, (2) in others a dedicated intervention is programmed, but (3) in majority of cases SV appears under LEADER intervention. The programming under LEADER varies as well starting from well defined SV support and implementation including defined target values of R40 indicators and ending with direct reference of SV under intervention but with an open perspective in what concerns the implementation and support, with also no R40 indicator programmed. We can distinguish two kind of support to SV from LAGs (1) capacity building and preparation activities that can be carried out e.g. through *umbrella* and transnational cooperation projects, (2) support to smart projects and initiatives. Katrina also mentioned that the understanding of SV strategies varies from one Member State to other and can define a vision document or simply an initiative or project.

2.1.3. The experience of Austria: How the Austrian CAP is supporting Smart Villages through LEADER & Lessons from the Austrian Smart Rural 27 Taskforce, by Michael Fischer (Smart Rural 27 National Expert)

Michael presented the integrated approach on how SV are programmed in the Austrian CAP SP. There are 3 interventions supporting SV, with LEADER intervention in the centre of them, all contributing to R40 indicator. Then LEADER territorial coverage in Austria and newly selected LAGs were presented, showing the potential of LEADER approach to support Smart Villages in Austria. Michael introduced a dedicated factsheet developed by Managing Authority stating that SV should be a tool for LAGs to address the local challenges, highlighting that digital tools are a mean and not an end in itself, and showing that there are no thematic restrictions for SV. Still the implementation of SV is not mandatory for LAGs. Michael presented the Austrian taskforce and its work on supporting LAGs in implementation of SV with a particular attention to the Federal region of Styria. Michael presented main findings of a pilot analysis of 16 LDSs in Styria, all strategies containing SV as an approach and tool for local development.

At the end, Michael presented his experience on facing the claims for a clear definition of Smart Villages. He presented his approach based on core elements of EU definition of smart villages, stating that they are similar to LEADER principles, and proposed to see the smartness as a chance for further development of these principles in a “continuum of ambition”.

2.1.4. Sharing of practical ideas and recommendations of the Smart Rural 27 project on how to support Smart Villages through LEADER in practical terms (Smart Villages in LDSs, by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)

The purpose of this presentation was to frame the group discussions and share previous findings from the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects on how to support SV through LEADER. Edina started with presenting EU definition that leads to critical questions on **what is smart, what is village and what**

is **strategy**. Some ideas and findings were shared to respond to these 3 questions. It was stated that smartness is a concept that has no clear meaning, and it is more a process than a state. To explain village, the local scale was emphasised, and for strategies – an integrated approach of several smart actions linked by a common vision, stating that strategy is not a format, but more an approach. Participatory approach was also emphasised as an important component to bring up the social innovations. It was highlighted that the goal of SV is to **achieve a social change at local level**.

These ideas were illustrated by examples of Ostana (Italy), Stanz (Austria), Tomszyn (Poland), by highlighting that all these examples may not have all SV components, because the local situation is very different from one place to another, but they all meet the following: they are local communities characterised by creativity, commitment, and sustainability, with a common vision and one or several local leaders. The key message was that there is no clear definition, but rather characterising and processual components that are shaping the smartness of a village.

2.2. Outcomes of the Group discussions

2.2.1. WS1: **What LEADER LAGs can do**: Initial experience of LEADER LAGs in programming Smart Villages: How to build capacity and support smart initiatives in rural communities through LEADER?

Facilitator: Hans-Olof Stalgren, SR27 National expert

Presenter: Ieva Vītola-Deusa, FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea, Latvia

Notetaker: Anita Balogh, SR27 supporting expert

ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE PRESENTATION

FLAG Partnership for Rural and the Sea in Latvia showcased their good practice in implementing Smart Villages. Engure village became the first pioneer smart village, the LAG learned valuable lessons on supporting leaders and focusing on simple actions. Their subsequent project, "Towards smart coastal villages," engaged six pilot villages with leaders, addressing funding challenges and promoting community-building activities. In the new strategy for 2023-2027, the focus is on activating communities, with the Local Action Group (LAG) supporting resilience, entrepreneurship, and cooperation capacities. Smart village projects receive special support and gain extra points during evaluation. The challenge is to define how these projects meet the criteria of a smart village e.g. including community engagement, clear descriptions of activities, and a proven track record of initiatives that benefit the majority of the community.

KEY QUESTIONS DISCUSSED

The first question and discussion centred on how **LEADER LAGs can incorporate support for Smart Villages in their Local Development Strategies (LDS)** and effectively implement it. Different countries had varying approaches, with some keeping the SV definition open, while others explored the integration of SV actions in their strategies, including research and development linkages, however a potential challenge might be that research is not among the supported actions via LEADER. It was noted that **LAGs might be able rather support the emergence of SV rather than in their implementation process**. Next question tried to explore how Smart Village (SV) initiatives were incorporated into the LDSs and **the use of R40 indicator**, with many participants using Result Indicator R40 to measure success e.g. counting new Smart Village strategies or projects that execute

Smart Village strategies. **Challenges in defining SVs and rolling out the LDS to support SVs were highlighted**, with a call for a concrete definition of SV strategy. **Collaboration opportunities between SR27 and LAGs were explored**, emphasising the importance of experience and knowledge sharing, including examples from other good practices and examples.

The key message emphasized the need for more examples to understand SVs and the definition of SV strategies, and the value of experience and knowledge sharing in promoting Smart Villages.

2.2.2. WS2: **What LEADER LAGs can do:** Initial experience of LEADER LAGs in programming Smart Villages: How to build capacity and support smart initiatives in rural communities through LEADER?

Facilitator: Edina Ocsko, Smart Rural 27 project Coordinator

Presenters : Piotr Sadolcha and Geza Gelencser

ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE PRESENTATION

The session started with the presentations of two LAG / LEADER Network representatives from Hungary & Poland:

- *Geza Gelencser (Koppanyvolgye LAG/ Hungarian LEADER Association, Hungary)* presented ideas on **how to programme Smart Villages in lagging behind rural areas**, such as the area of Koppanyvolgye. He stressed that mobilising stakeholders in such regions is not an easy task, due to the fact that many of the active, young and educated people have left the region. Therefore, normally “comfort-improving” solutions are sought (small-scale social innovations) rather than highly advanced technological innovations. LEADER is an ideal tool for such eco-social innovations. Small-scale innovations linked to energy rationalisation, natural resource management, community development and circular economy are the first steps to become “smart”. This is also the scope of SV included in the LDS. On the one hand, smart community solutions are planned in the thematic areas of local product infrastructure, renewable energy and co-working; on the other hand measures to strengthen local human capital are foreseen under Smart Villages (such as local climate circles, human resource development in lagging behind regions and preparation of Smart Village Strategies). It was stressed that the resources of the LAGs are not sufficient to carry out all relevant project development and capacity-building tasks related to SV. There is need for local leaders (visionary figures), inspiration, transferable knowledge, financial resources and flexible regulatory & policy environment.
- *Piotr Sadlocha (LAG Representative/ Polish LEADER Network)* explained that support to SV under LEADER started already in the 2014-20 programming period in Poland. **The expectation is to prepare a smart village concept (strategic document)**, which should be very short (e.g. up to 4 pages). The SV strategies should have four points: (1) Partnership at least two partners (2) Engagement of members in the design and implementation of the concept (3) SWOT analysis, and (4) The list of planned smart projects. LAGs can help in the preparation of the concept as well as in the implementation. For instance for Piotr’s LAG they expect 20-21 concepts. They have around 7 municipalities and each of them consists of several villages (his municipality consists of 19 villages). There is also a direct intervention, but funding for the implementation of the SV concepts is relatively limited. It is important to have local leaders. “If you don’t have local leaders then even if you have the money you won’t get far.” – Piotr said.

The key message emphasized ...

During the discussion the following issues came up:

- **The role of local leaders** was discussed. One has to mobilise local leaders and give them support in the process. There is often only one person taking the leading role in a community and they are totally overworked, so there is need to disperse the leading role among many people and generations to share the workload and avoid a gap after a lead person cannot act anymore.
- It was highlighted by Ilivja Asmane (LAG Aizkraukle District Partnership) that in Latvia the LAGs are just finishing their strategies. For instance her LAG put smart villages in the SV strategy after the Smart Rural 21 project visit to Stanz, as they understood it is a very important topic. **They are looking for partners for LEADER cooperation project on Smart Villages.** The LAG also supports smart village initiatives within its territory, although not necessarily linked to a smart village strategy.
- One suggestion is for **future meetings is to do a matchmaking** session for LAGs - suggested Judit Racz (LAG Felso-Homokhatsag, Hungary). She also stressed that **LAG managers need training on Smart Villages.** LAGs have to support strategy development in small communities. They can also support smart ideas for instance incentivise through providing extra scores in the evaluation. There is often not enough capacity in the LAGs to facilitate the process for instance, when there are too many municipalities within the LAG area.
- **Strategy development and implementation finance** is and remains a key issue. It is important to identify and tag projects, which are low-cost in order for communities to get moving fast until they find funding for their larger project. One idea for managing authorities could be to give extra resources to those LAGs who integrate SV in their LDSs.
- **The Smart Rural 27 will aim to support continuous exchange among LAGs** is to help facilitate corporation and share experiences among them.

2.2.3. **WS3: What networks can do:** How LEADER Associations / Networks and CAP Networks can support the emergence of Smart Villages through LEADER?

Facilitator: Katrina Idu, Smart Rural 27 Assistant Coordinator

Presenter: Zane Seredina, Latvian Rural Forum

ABOUT THE GOOD PRACTICE PRESENTATION

Latvian Rural Forum – a LEADER Association with the main mission to promote balanced development of Latvian rural territories, presented their good practice example on supporting the emergence of Smart Villages in Latvia, consisting of an initiative started in 2021 as a part of LEADER transnational project activity setting up a recognition sign “Smart Village” to identify and support good practices and to encourage building a common understanding of what SV are, as well as to mobilise the support for SV implementation. The beneficiaries of this recognition sign have confirmed that their cooperation possibilities have improved, they have also increased their recognition at national, regional and municipal level, as well as it is easier to present themselves in order to get support for further activities. The competition is organised three phases: (1) call for applications, (2) evaluation process by jury composed by different stakeholders- media, MAs, NGOs, academics and even the President of Latvia, (3) ceremony of delivery of the recognition sign. The European guidelines on SV were adapted to the national situation and used as evaluation criteria. Until 2022 18 villages have received the recognition sign “Smart Village”, around 30 villages have received the sign “On the way of being smart”. There is also a mentoring and network system set up for applicants and rewarded villages.

KEY QUESTIONS DISCUSSED

Participants were asked to share their experience as CAP networks or LEADER associations in supporting SV.

Ulrika Holgren from Swedish Rural Network confirmed having carried out a lot of SV support activities during past programming period – working groups, seminars for LAGs to promote SV inclusions in LDS. Now there is a **common chat set up among LEADER areas** having included SV in their strategies (around 27) where they are communicating on best way supporting SV. It is also important to promote between village that LEADER is a tool that they can use.

Marie Permingeat from France, representing European LEADER Association for Rural development (ELARD) and a French LAG affirms that in France **there is a clear guidance** on how to create Smart Villages coming from FR CAP network – but it seems that LAGs are not so interested in SV, therefore there is an interest in understanding how actually other countries take ownership of this concept, how to make more concrete the implementation of SV- it seems that **the concept is still too vague for LAGs**.

Evangelia Tzoumaka from Ministry of Rural development in Greece shared that they are currently **working on guidance on how to create SV strategy and how to implement smart actions and interventions**, emphasising that the idea is that the SV strategies are funded also from other funds not only through CAP.

Zanda Dimanta Svilpe from Latvian CAP Network also mentioned the need of a guidance for LAGs – stating that the concept is interesting for everyone, but there is a different understanding among stakeholders, and Latvian CAP Network sees that one of the main tasks is **to promote common understanding**.

Meeri Maastik from Estonian CAP Network mentions that they are now working on a thematic approach of smart tourism.

It was shared that Polish Rural network also was organising training and also a competition “My smart village” trying to find good practice examples across Poland – initiatives mainly came from local stakeholders and less from LAGs.

When asked about village perspective, Pierro Bruni representing a village in Italy stress the need to distinguish SV from Smart Cities as some stakeholders thinks about SV as a recycled Smart Cities concept. **Participation should be one of the main dynamics that is promoted under SV** and not digitalisation, because it is about how to change development and not only introducing smart tools. Pierro feels that It is also a good opportunity to regenerate LEADER approach.

It was emphasised that the LAGs may have different level of understanding therefore a unique guidance may not work- some of the LAGs are more advanced and others are just in a beginning phase of working with rural communities as entities in their territories.

In order to step aside from defining the concept and actually promote social innovation and move forward action, the possible actions consist of developing guidance, promoting villages to give visibility to villages, looking for good examples and to market them on social media

The key message emphasized is that the Smart Villages concept is still vague for LAGs and other stakeholders, therefore it is important to continue seeking for and promoting good practice stories – which can be one of the main tasks for LEADER associations and National CAP networks. Also elaboration of practical guidance on SV implementation both for LAGs and Village sis important in order to make the concept less vague.

2.2.4. WS4: What Managing Authorities can do: How Managing Authorities can support LAGs in their efforts of supporting the emergence of Smart Villages at the local level?

Facilitator: Michael Fischer, Smart Rural 27 National Expert

Notetaker: Emese Ocsko, E40, Smart Rural 27 administrative support

KEY QUESTIONS DISCUSSED

The participating Managing Authorities (MA) were invited to **share how SV are programmed through LEADER in Member states**. In Romania LDS are not yet prepared, the SV concept is treated generally in the CAP SP (in LEADER intervention) with no precise guidance on how to implement this concept. In response to a question, it was affirmed that in Austria also there is no specific funding dedicated in LEADER for SV implementation, but it is encouraged to use SV concept, administratively SV projects are treated as LEADER projects, with a particularity of having specific SV features including strategy which is an obligation. Additional points were given in the selection process to LAGs choosing the SV concept. In Greece, SV will also be implemented under LEDAER (through a specific sub-intervention) and MA is preparing a guidance document mainly dedicated to LAGs and a committee is being prepared to be responsible of distinguishing SV projects from other projects.

In Croatia – a pilot project on SV was funded by an open call through NRN – as one of the main challenges appeared the difficulty to engage people as they are not used to participate – to deal with this challenge MA decided to programme SV under LEADER because LAGs have an established system and experience of participation. In the first time the accent will be on National CAP Network in finding pilots, so that it is possible to test and develop ideas that can be transmitted to other villages. Discussions with MA responsible of ESF have been carried out to build a cooperation, so that all projects with SV strategies (funded by LEADER) can get extra points in other funds' calls (healthcare, etc. in the scope of what is financed from other funds) and in that way connecting regional and rural development.

While **discussing the challenges that MAs see at this moment**, along to the challenge of engaging people in participatory activities mentioned by Croatian representative, the vagueness of definition was also mentioned, but most of the participants agreed that the fact that SV are not well defined in the CAP SP allows to “learning by doing” and better adapting this new concept to the national and local contexts. Even more – too strict definition at this stage could exclude some villages that are already smart, Greek representatives mentioned that this is the reason why they have chosen to set up an approach based on SV criteria more that on definition. The boundary between SV project and strategy was also discussed and participants agreed that the key difference is the overall vision on how resolve problems at very local level.

Participants suggested that these kinds of exchanges, that promote not only good practices, but also create a space of discussion should be continued, as all involved participants are seeking for ways of the best SV implementation. The need for capacity building at all levels was also stressed.

The key message emphasized was that everyone is in the learning process and tries to build the Smart Village frame that suits the most to the national context and their understanding, more exchanges creating place for discussions between MAs are needed.

3. Conclusions

There is a need to exchange further between LEDAER stakeholders without staying in the definition phase on what Smart Villages are – with more focus on how to start to implement Smart Villages at all level. Smart Rural 27 will continue this platform with second round of sessions in Autumn. LAGs are invited to approach the project coordination team.