

## CALLING FOR ACTION THROUGH SMART VILLAGES

*Join the European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory to design better policies for rural areas*

### Smart Villages as a new opportunity not only for rural developers but also for others

**Smart Villages** is a relatively new policy tool of the European Union initiated by the European Parliament in 2017 and supported by the European Commission through technical support projects, including the Pilot Project on Smart Eco-social Villages (2018-2019), the 1<sup>st</sup> Preparatory Action (2020-2022) and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Preparatory Action (2021-2024) on Smart Rural Areas in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Smart Villages is a **key tool to help local rural communities respond to pressing challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** - including climate change, lack of local services and employment, and depopulation in rural areas - through innovative/ smart solutions (new technologies, digitalisation and social processes). The revitalisation of rural areas and people is crucial for our whole society (including urban areas) and therefore, a concern for all. Therefore, **Smart Villages is a key concept** not only for rural development policy, but **also for other key policy areas** such as cohesion/ regional, social & employment, environmental & climate, energy, transport & mobility policies.

### Supporting rural areas through all policies is a high-level goal of the European Union

The **Long-term Vision for the EU's Rural Areas** (LTVRA) aims to respond to the megatrends and challenges posed by globalisation, urbanisation, ageing and to reap the benefits of the green and digital transitions, place-sensitive policies.<sup>1</sup> The High-level Rural Policy Forum organised on 27-29 September 2023 in Sigüenza (Spain) by the Spanish presidency of the Council of the EU and the European Commission aimed to advance the political agenda for the future of rural areas and support Member States **to take action to unlock the potential of rural areas in achieving the objectives** of the LTVRA.

EU decisionmakers showed **high-level of commitment towards making various EU policies** – especially the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and Cohesion Policy – and funds better available for rural areas and people. In his speech, EU Commissioner for Agriculture *Janusz Wojciechowski* highlighted that **“we need to use more interventions and instruments, we need to create synergies between all policies and programmes and we need all levels of governance to contribute.”** Commissioner for Cohesion and Reform *Elisa Ferreira* urged policymakers to focus also on small towns and rural areas, **prioritise balanced territorial development, long-term strategies tailored to local assets**, and coordinated efforts among various policies and financial instruments. She concluded her speech by stating that **“Our motto in Cohesion Policy is that “no place no region should be left behind”. This sounds great but it has got to be put in practice, so let us all do our utmost.”**<sup>2</sup>

### The Smart Rural 27 Project: Let's translate words into practice

The Smart Rural 27 project aims **to support policymakers to design Smart Village policies** that support community-led development, stronger communities in rural areas, long-term strategies that respond to 21<sup>st</sup> Century challenges, innovative solutions in services & digitalisation, renewable energy, environment, youth engagement, rural business, employment creation and more.

The project aims to connect relevant stakeholders and **provide practical information and guidance** on how programmes and strategic plans under various EU policies can better integrate support for Smart Villages. This way **Member States and regions can highlight their efforts in the future on how they support rural areas and communities** aligned with European Union goals and expectations, and how they spend EU funding for rural areas and communities more effectively and in a targeted way.

<sup>1</sup> European Commission, Long-term vision for rural areas: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_21\\_3162](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_21_3162)

<sup>2</sup> High-level Rural Policy Forum – Shaping the Future of Rural areas: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9NfBGkucB4>