Summary Report of the 3rd Meeting of the e-Service Knowledge Cluster held on 9th November 2023

Summary of presentations

The third meeting of the SR27 project's E-Service Cluster was held with a view to identifying the specific support needs of those villages which had expressed an interest in receiving customized support in utilizing digital services as part of their Smart Village ambitions. As a preparatory step, each of these village had completed a short questionnaire prior to the meeting. All in all, seven villages from Italy, Spain, Hungary and Ireland participated in the survey. In this context, the villages mentioned a wide range of digital solutions that they are considering as part of their smart village ambitions:

- online administrative services
- digital communications platforms
- smart agricultural technology
- mobile applications for community engagement
- digital educational applications
- solutions for environmental monitoring and sustainability
- smart mobility solutions

When it comes to the level of maturity the villages' individual initiatives have reached up to now, a mixed picture emerged from the preparatory survey. While some villages have only just begun to develop initial ideas, others have started to initiate concrete steps to plan the development of an envisaged digital service.

Against this general background, Edina Osco (E40) welcomed the participants and briefly introduced the aim of the meeting. Lutz Kubitschke (empirica) then presented an overview of the overall support process which is to be tailored to the individual villages to meet their specific support needs. In this context, he highlighted that on the surface many digital technologies appear, self-evidently, to have a high utility value for addressing challenges frequently faced by local 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 most cases, is however quite different. Developing a practicable "digital solution" for a local problem tends to require more than just "technology". For successfully exploiting the potentials generally provided by digital technologies, typically different stakeholders – in fact people – need work together successfully with help of digital tools. Typically, the individual stakeholders need to take over specific roles and fulfill certain tasks, be it with or without the support of digital technology, to put a novel digital service in place. For the successful introduction of such services within local communities, it is therefore important to at first reach a consensus between all relevant stakeholders on what they believe should be achieved with the help of digital technology. The design or selection of the technology itself needs then be considered on this basis. In that respect, under no circumstances should it be assumed that the views of different stakeholders will automatically coincide from the outset.

Based on earlier experiences with the development and implementation of digital services in local communities, a three staged approach has proven useful:

Step 1 - Ambition focusing: Here the focus is on making sure that all stakeholders share the same vision when it comes to utilising digital technology for addressing perceived local challenges. The first step is to find a common language in defining what the general idea of using a digital tool would mean in practice. As already mentioned, at that stage it often turns out that the desired solution for addressing local challenges can frequently not be delivered by digital devices or software products alone, but by incorporating specific roles played by volunteers and/or professionals into a digitally supported service scheme. Beyond merely implementing software, the desired digital solution therefore tends to require the agreement of reliable collaboration processes among local stakeholders who may have a role to play, in terms of clearly defined roles and responsibilities. At this stage, the main aim is not to define exactly how a digital solution can be implemented, but what it should achieve from the point of view of the different local stakeholders involved. The expected benefits should be spelled out as concretely as possible already at this stage.

Step II - Maturity assessment: Once a joint vision for the digital solution has been agreed among all local stakeholders, the next work step focuses on a critical appraisal of this initial vision. Here, the stakeholders are requested to critically reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the hitherto envisaged digital approach. When doing so, aspects that might make it difficult or perhaps even impossible to put the currently stated ambition into practice should receive particular attention. Depending on the specific circumstances prevailing in a local community, a quite different factors may potentially impede the successful implementation of the initially stated joint ambition in terms of a fully up-and-running digital service. The basic idea underlying the maturity assessment is therefore that all stakeholders "take a step back" and reflect in a self-critical manner on the initially stated ambition before concrete measures are taken to set up a local project. As a result, the initially defined vision of the digital solution might even need to be revisited and adapted respectively.

Step III - Operational implementation planning: This work step aims at translating the outcomes of the previous work into an operational plan setting out how the envisaged digital solution is to be put into practice under every-day-conditions. More precisely, the focus is on transforming the strengths and opportunities of the jointly consolidated vision of a digital solution into a concrete implementation project. The structure of the implementation plan is to be designed in a way that guides the involved stakeholders through the entire project implementation process. It should also enable the stakeholders to effectively manage and monitor progress when it comes to individual implementation tasks.

For each of these methodological steps, empirica will tailor further guidance and supportive materials to the specific support need of each village. Overall, three villages participated in the meeting. Each briefly explained in what way digital technologies are envisaged to be harnessed for solving specific challenges faced locally. This was followed by a discussion on how best to support the villages in further progressing their ideas.

Summary of the discussion

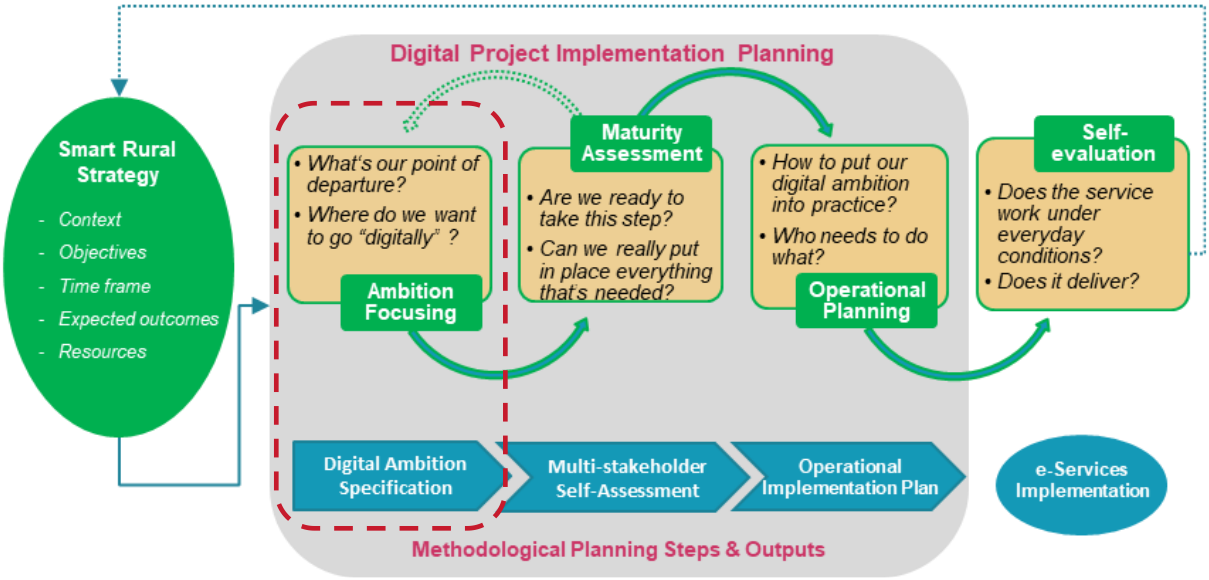
Oliete, a village located within the Region of Aragon in Spain, aims to harness the Smart Village concept for establishing a sustainable and inclusive rural living environment for its citizens, thereby relying on a powerful fiber optical telecommunications network. Like many other rural communities throughout the country, Oliete is facing an accelerating trend towards population ageing and depopulation coupled with lacking employment opportunities. As a result, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain basic services, preserve local cultural traditions and achieve socio-economic stability and environmental sustainability. Oliete is participating in setting up a rural innovation center, which is intended to function as dynamic space for developing novel solutions for challenges faced by rural communities more generally. In this context, the village would like to utilize the support mechanism available from the SR27 eService Knowledge Cluster for developing a specific innovation project with a focus on utilizing solar powered electric bicycles to facilitate local tourism. Such bicycles are intended to be made available to tourists, together with a mobile App guiding them through the area and providing access to information from local restaurants, farmers selling local food and the like. The discussion revealed that an existing funding scheme is planned to be utilized for putting this initial idea into practice. According to Oliete, the support generally available through the e-Service Cluster comes at the right time, as the current idea requires further sharpening before it can be implemented in terms of a dedicated project.

Gaiba is a village located in the Region of Venice in Italy sharing almost the same challenges with Oliete, for example when it comes to population ageing, depopulation and unfavorable economic conditions. The village does already utilize digital technologies such as a municipal website, a Facebook presence, and a mobile App to keep citizens informed about local issues. The municipality is now considering extending the utilization of digital technologies for enabling the citizens and those moving into the area to book public services provided by the municipality, potentially by means of a new mobile APP that could also be directed towards tourists visiting the area. Based on a fiber optic telecommunications network installed some years ago, the village would also like to attract digital entrepreneurs as a place to live and do business. Beyond this, Gaiba would like to explore opportunities provided by smart farming solutions to local farmers. From the discussion, it emerged that focusing the envisaged novel digital solution's scope would be desirable to avoid the risk of overstretching human and economic resources generally available to the village. Potentially, the focus could be put on a digital solution for community engagement and attracting people from outside, including digital entrepreneurs.

Saint-Marcel, a village located in the Italian Aosta Region, would like to exploit the capabilities generally provided by digital technologies for developing collective responses to day-to-day problems. When compared to urban areas, social ties between the population tend to be stronger in rural communities. T This situation can be seen as an advantage, and digital technologies could be used to jointly overcome disadvantages that rural communities typically face, e.g. when it comes to maintaining public services in more sparsely populated areas. Against this background, the village intents to harness digital technologies for the self-organization of the local community. Families, for example, could be empowered by a digital solution to self-organize a local after schooling scheme that relies on voluntary mutual support. As emerged during the discussion, there would be a possibility to secure funding in the framework of an Interreg program. Saint-Marcel is considering submitting a proposal in collaboration with a French partner village. The support generally available through the e-Service Cluster was considered helpful, as the current idea requires further sharpening with a

view to meet specific requirements for public funding. It was agreed to involve the French partner village in this process as well.

Figure 1 – Graphic summary of the overall support process available in the framework of the SR27 e-Service Cluster



Source: empirica ©

Overall, the discussion revealed that all three villages would benefit from a systematic focusing of their initial ideas, in line with the first step of the overall support process available as part of the e-Service Cluster activities (Figure 1). It was therefore agreed that, as a next step, empirica would customize a related guidance document to the specific circumstances prevailing at each individual village. The customised guidance documents will then be further discussed in bilateral follow-up meetings which are to be scheduled on a case-by-case basis. The latter will enable each village to develop a consolidated ambition statement in close collaboration with relevant local stake holders.

As an input for the customization process, each village agreed to provide empirica with a brief statement in writing (at maximum two pages) along the line of two guiding key questions:

1. *How do you currently envisage the new digital service being used in concrete terms?*
   The villages were asked to describe as lively as possible what the new digital service should do from the perspective of a typical user by one or more illustrative examples or a day-in-a-life scenario.
2. *Are there any structural and/or practical boundaries within which the envisaged service is to be developed and/or implemented?*
   The villages were asked to describe any important framework conditions under which the envisaged digital service is to be developed and/or introduced. This may concern a variety of aspect such as certain funding programs, application deadlines, established cooperations that may need to be considered. Also, existing policies and/or administrative frameworks may need to be considered. Whatever the villages deem worth mentioning in this context should be briefly described at the current stage.