



Report on 2nd LEADER Stakeholders Platform event



28 February 2024

9.30 – 11.30 CET

Online



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1. Context

1.1. Purpose of the session

The second European Stakeholder Platform session for LEADER Stakeholders aimed to provide an update on the state-of-play of the CAP Strategic Plan analysis on Smart Villages under LEADER intervention carried out by the project (the report not yet public at the time), to present examples of support mechanisms for implementing Smart Villages under LEADER, to discuss the needs and challenges of participants, as well as to discuss and plan for the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference (held on 18-19 March 2024 in Brussels).

1.2. Target audience and registration report

The main target groups of this session were LEADER LAGs, LEADER Associations, CAP Managing Authorities and CAP Networks. 77 participants registered from 25 Member States. In reality 56 representatives participated out of which 27 LAGs.

The majority of participants represented LEADER Local Action groups, other stakeholders included LEADER Associations, Managing Authorities, National CAP networks, as well as Smart Rural 27 National experts. Of the 49 registered LEADER LAG representatives, 39 confirmed during the registration survey that their Local Development Strategies have already been selected (see Figure 2), and among them 34 confirmed that their LDSs include Smart Villages (see Figure 3).

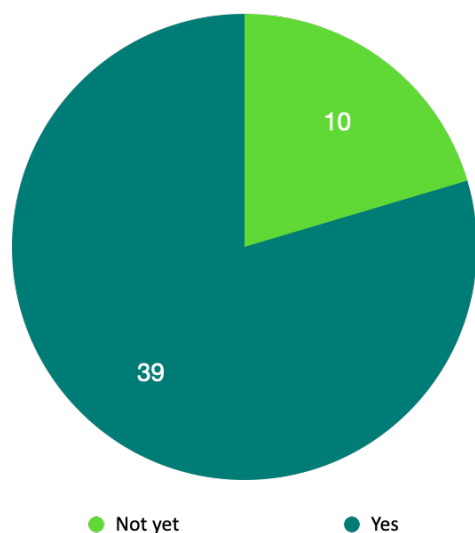


Figure 2, If you are a LAG representative, is your LDS approved?

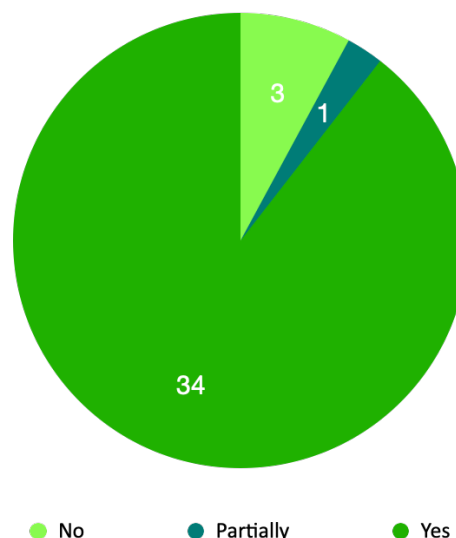


Figure 3, If yes, is Smart Villages included in your LDS?

Key Innovation themes appearing in relation to Smart Villages in the above-mentioned LDSs were circular economy, bioeconomy, social and digital innovation, green transportation, green architecture and the New European Bauhaus, renewable energy, socio-economic change, sustainable tourism, protection of cultural heritage, youth involvement, support to elderly and disadvantage people.

The main questions and needs indicated in the registration form included:

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- How to successfully implement Smart Villages concept;
- Gather information and good practice examples;
- How Smart Villages projects can be delivered in small, rural areas;
- How to deliver community consultation and participatory processes/ How to engage local people;
- How to support local communities in their Smart Village journey;
- Incorporation of Climate actions in Smart Villages;
- What is smart/ and does it need to be digital;
- How is the concept of SV integrated into CAP Strategic plans;
- Possible support mechanisms and different funding sources for SV implementation;
- Conceptual framework of SV and local innovations.

1.3. Agenda

Timing	Agenda Item
9.30 - 10.00	<u>Update on the key findings of the CAP Analysis on Smart Villages & other LEADER-related Smart Rural 27 work</u> , by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)
10.00 - 10.15	Presentations on various LEADER approaches: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <u>The LEADER curriculum in Ireland</u>, by Pat Kennedy (eTownz & SR27 National expert) - <u>Overview of Smart Villages in the Latvian LDSs</u>, by Katrina Idu (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Assistant Coordinator) - <u>LEADER support Smart Village project preparation</u>, by Wiet van Meel (Hilvarenbeek, NL)
10.15 - 11.00	Working group discussions: challenges & needs
11.00 - 11.20	Feedback from working groups
11.20 - 11.30	Concluding remarks & Information on Smart Rural 27 Final Conference

2. Outcomes of the event

2.1. Introductory presentations

- 2.1.1. Update on the key findings of the CAP Analysis on Smart Villages & other LEADER-related Smart Rural 27 work, by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)

Edina Ocsko presented the ongoing analysis on Smart Villages within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) framework in Europe. The analysis includes a synthesis report that provides an overview of the situation across Europe, focusing primarily on the CAP but also referencing other relevant programmes at national and regional levels. The analysis reflects the state-of-play of the CAP Strategic plans as of end of 2022, noting that the landscape is evolving. Some countries have dedicated interventions for Smart

Villages, with specific interventions highlighted in certain CAP Strategic plans. It is noted that in most Member States, Smart Villages is expected to be implemented through the LEADER intervention. Some countries use LEADER as a mechanism to help implement dedicated interventions, while in others LEADER is the main intervention to implement Smart Villages. However, there are also countries where Smart Villages are only mentioned under LEADER intervention without specific details on the implementation. Edina also mentioned that there is limited information on how Smart Villages are programmed in different Local Development Strategies – although some Member States have already done some analysis (e.g. Austria) and others are about to do it. Managing Authorities and CAP networks are encouraged to design activities that support LEADER LAGs in implementing Smart Villages and accessing multiple funding sources. Examples from Hungary, Poland, and Austria demonstrate efforts to support Smart Villages through training, capacity-building, and the development of specific guidance to LEADER LAGs. The need for collaboration, experimentation, and support at various levels was also emphasised.

2.1.2. The LEADER curriculum in Ireland, by Pat Kennedy (eTownz & SR27 National expert)

Pat Kennedy from Ireland introduced the Smart Village Curriculum delivered by eTownz. The curriculum was developed over two years to align the delivery of Smart Villages across different regions. It consists of a six-module courses focusing on strategies and modular approaches to community development. The curriculum emphasises dynamic planning using records that can be continually updated and categorised into different types such as assets, stakeholders, and projects. A thematic hierarchy was suggested to ensure consistency in approach across different regions. The management structure involves a coordination team and action teams based on thematic areas, enabling modular and continually updated community plans. The aim is to stimulate interest and promote participation in community activities. Pat shared experiences from delivering the curriculum in nine counties, highlighting common challenges faced by communities such as administrative burden, communication, and volunteer management. Tools were developed to support communities, including a dashboard for compiling plans and access to databases of sample assets and stakeholders. Each community gets its own website and planning dashboard to facilitate interaction and involvement. The process focuses on bringing together people with similar interests and skills and emphasises evidence-based approaches to local development.

2.1.3. Overview of Smart Villages in the Latvian LDSs, by Katrina Idu (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Assistant Coordinator)

Katrina Idu provided an overview of the initial findings of the analysis on how Smart Villages appear in Latvian LDSs. Smart Villages in the Latvian CAP Strategic Plan are programmed under LEADER, with some specifications already in place, but without indicator R.40 programmed. There are 33 Local Action Groups (LAGs) covering almost the entire territory of Latvia. The Local Development Strategies have recently been published and approved, and analyses are being conducted for the LDSs using keyword search methods to identify Smart Villages, smart solutions, and community-building initiatives. One of the first conclusions is that in Latvia, Smart Villages are understood mainly in terms of social innovation, aimed at increasing community activity, and creating new NGOs. Katrina highlighted the diversity in the level of advancement among LAGs, with some explicit mentioning of Smart Villages in their interventions with increased support intensity and directly related indicators. However, there are other LDSs with a less clear reference to Smart Villages, making it challenging to assess the actual impact of Smart Village initiatives. Some LAGs use cooperation projects to create synergies between different communities and enhance networking opportunities. Assessment methods for Smart Villages vary, with some counting the number of activated communities or initiatives without clear criteria. Katrina emphasised the importance of capacity-building for LAGs to implement Smart Village initiatives effectively. There is a need for complementary national and European funding to implement diverse Smart Village initiatives, aligning with the concept of LAGs as developers of territories seeking different

funding and policy opportunities. She concluded by highlighting the need for support from communities and the importance of unifying criteria for assessing Smart Villages to ensure a coherent approach to evaluation and project implementation.

2.1.4. LEADER support Smart Village project preparation, by Wiet van Meel (Hilvarenbeek, NL)

Wiet van Meel presented the initiative of Hilvarenbeek, a small village in the south of the Netherlands with a focus on sustainability. The initiative began about 8 or 9 years ago with a group of people who elaborated a sustainability model. He explained their approach, which involves looking at each initiative's economic and societal aspects and identifying possible linkages to strengthen them. Wiet described six different surroundings in two subgroups: Physical and Social, both composed of a societal, spatial, and economic surrounding, each with its functions and people actively involved in addressing various challenges. The working method of Hilvarenbeek Smart Village initiatives follows six phases, starting from (1) idea, (2) initiative, (3) feasibility and (4) project plan to (5) realisation and (6) consolidation, with a focus on phases 1 to 4, which involve creating solid plans with financing included. This approach aims to make initiatives more sustainable from the start. Wiet mentioned their engagement with the European Commission and their recognition of the initiative's alignment with the concept of Smart Villages. Initially, the LEADER support went more to phases 5 and 6, but with time they managed to enhance the LEADER support and now it goes also to phases 1 to 4. They created a Local Action Group for this planning period, and the implementation of LDS will start in April. He supports the idea that European support should also go to financing systems facilitating exchanges between local project leaders.

2.2. Outcomes of the Group discussions

Group discussions were based on 2 groups of key questions:

1. What is the state-of-play in your country in terms of LAGs implementing and supporting Smart Villages?
2. What are your current needs? What do you think is necessary for better implementation of Smart Villages? What do you want to hear from other countries and how can we create better linkages between LEADER and local support?

2.2.1. Outcomes from Discussion Group 1

The first Discussion Group highlighted the need for guidance to Local Actions Groups on how to support communities, especially in creating strategies and guiding them towards smart solutions. The importance of digital tools was highlighted especially the need to increase digital literacy among communities, citing an example from Ireland where a set of digital community tools are freely accessible. Another key point is the importance of continued exchanges and peer-to-peer learning among communities and other stakeholders, including volunteers who play a significant role in community initiatives. Furthermore, it was suggested that Smart Villages should be more integrated into the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Strategic Plans, not just under LEADER, and the potential synergies with other programmes like the European Innovation Partnership for Agricultural Productivity and Sustainability (EIP-AGRI) should be further explored. Finally, the importance of understanding funding tools at different levels was discussed to facilitate multi-funding for Smart Village initiatives. The Rural Toolkit was mentioned suggesting that there may be a need for some further enhancements of the tool to better support specific Smart Villages needs.



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2.2.2. Outcomes from Discussion Group 2

Some of the LAGs, that have included Smart Villages in their LDSs, shared that they have chosen to include SV in a cross-cutting and methodological way. Digital is not necessarily the main focus as there is a stronger request for social innovations. It was also concluded that Smart Villages could be the “new boost to LEADER” in some LAGs or it could be seen as a new approach to integrate youth into local development processes. The discussion also focused on discussing what is smart, a good practice example from Croatia was shared– where the Managing Authority has provided indications on typical Smart Villages’ actions to LAGs. Still, it was emphasised that any smart solution should be in line with participatory methodologies, emerging from the community needs and with a community impact. It was stated that even if Smart Villages is often included in the LDSs, the understanding of how to implement Smart Villages is very vague, therefore there is a need for specific support to LAGs – in some countries support actions are being launched, as the above-mentioned guidance in Croatia, the Latvian CAP Network guidance on Smart Villages implementation methodology, or the Smart Villages training elaborated in Ireland. It was added that it is important to be practical, getting too theoretical and academic in the supporting actions (Smart Villages planning with communities) is risking of losing some communities on the way.

3. Conclusions

Edina Ocsko concluded the meeting by emphasising the need for more exchanges like this, highlighting three key areas for continued focus: exchanging, networking, and capacity-building. She stressed the importance of more information and guidance for Local Action Groups to support them in implementing and supporting smart village strategies. Edina encouraged participants to check out various resources and tools available on the websites of Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects to support Smart Village initiatives. Furthermore, she invited participants to join the upcoming Smart Rural 27 Final Conference, which will feature community examples and discussions on programming aspects. Edina also mentioned specific workshops to be organized to further explore ideas and formulate practical recommendations for supporting Smart Villages through LEADER.