



Report on
2nd European Stakeholder Platform
meeting for
European organisations



6 May 2024, 10.00-11.15 CET

Online

Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Contract No:
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1. Context & Agenda

The purpose of the meeting was **to share and discuss the outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference** and **explore relevant activities of EU stakeholder organisations** and networks that can help to **bring further the final outcomes of the Smart Rural 27 project**.

11 participants registered from **6 European organisations and institutions**: European Commission, Rural Communities Alliance (ERCA), European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), Fondazione Bruno Kessler (SMART ERA project), European Joint Research Centre (JRC) and Partnership for Rural Europe (PREPARE).

The proposed Agenda was as follows:

<i>Time</i>	<i>Agenda item</i>
10.00 - 10.10	Opening & Introductions
10.10 - 10.40	Presentation on the <i>Smart Rural 27</i> project main outcomes, the Final Conference, project closure & future activities on Smart Villages, by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 project Coordinator)
10.40 - 11.10	What's next for Smart Villages? - A discussion on Smart Village activities of EU networks, projects and stakeholder organisations
11.10 - 11.15	Concluding remarks

2. Outcomes

2.1. Presentation on the *Smart Rural 27* project main outcomes, the Final Conference, project closure & future activities on Smart Villages, by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 project Coordinator)

Edina Ocsko presented the *Smart Rural 27* project and its outcomes and resources. The **Smart Rural 27 project** has had a different focus compared to Smart Rural 21. While *Smart Rural 21* emphasised community engagement and concrete actions on the ground, *Smart Rural 27* has a **stronger policy-oriented approach**. *Smart Rural 27* aimed to prepare both Member States and rural communities for the implementation of Smart Villages within the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and advocate for support through other policies, especially the Cohesion Policy. The Smart Rural 27 website that gathers all the produced outcomes and resources will transform, integrating its content into other EU platforms.



The project produced various outputs, including (1) CAP Strategic plans analysis, (2) policy work, and (3) engagement with rural communities. The **CAP analysis** involves factsheets and a synthesis report, expected to be published during May. This report provides insights into the support for Smart Villages across EU Member states. Additionally, a report on the **synergies between Smart Villages and the European Green Deal** is forthcoming. This report, compiled with input from national experts, explores policy and practical connections between the two initiatives. The presentations highlighted the extensive work involved in compiling and validating data, emphasising the value of the materials for future endeavors in Smart Village development.

Edina Ocsko continued by discussing the **project's policy-level achievements**, particularly the efforts at the national level through **National Taskforces**. The project's website serves as a repository of rich information, including reports and analyses from various countries' task forces. The website features hyperlinks to publications, reports, and survey results from different countries. These materials aim to share the project's outcomes extensively, reflecting a principle maintained throughout the project.

The presentation then shifted to community engagement efforts, which were not initially part of the project's scope but emerged from the desire to involve communities further. Three main outcomes were highlighted: the **geomapping tool**, **lighthouse examples** showcasing smart community initiatives, and **knowledge clusters** to engage interested communities. The geomapping tool, although primarily a top-down approach, aims to collect village profiles and enhance community engagement. Despite challenges in gathering information, efforts have resulted in nearly 100 village profiles being uploaded to the database. Additionally, elaborated Lighthouse factsheets were created to showcase the complexity of smart village actions, emphasising an integrated and holistic approach. These factsheets were well-received during the project's final event, demonstrating the diverse approaches to Smart Village development.

Edina Ocsko elaborated further on the project's outcomes, particularly highlighting the establishment of the **European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory** which was built upon three pillars: national and regional taskforces, stakeholder platforms, and knowledge clusters. The observatory engaged between 600 and 700 individuals, demonstrating significant interest and involvement in the project. Moving forward, there's a recognition of the need to build on the energy and interest generated by the project. While the exact format may evolve, the goal is to continue fostering collaboration and exchange at various levels and through different platforms. Additionally, the project developed an inventory, connected to both *Smart Rural 21* and *Smart Rural 27*, serving as a repository of materials dedicated to Smart Villages. This resource aims to facilitate easier access to information and insights generated throughout the projects.

Looking ahead, discussions revolve around how the project outcomes can be sustained and integrated into broader initiatives, such as the CAP implementation process. There's



an emphasis on creating synergies with other EU funds and programs, particularly through platforms like the Rural Pact and the EU CAP network.

2.2. What's next for Smart Villages? - A discussion on Smart Village activities of EU networks, projects and stakeholder organisations

The discussion was organised around 3 questions:

- How do you see synergies with your activities?
- What kind of activities we could commonly be engaged in?
- Any other comments you have on the outcomes of the project?

Matteo Gerosè (Fondazione Bruno Kessler) shared that they are somehow newcomers in the rural field because they have worked a lot with Innovations in non-rural areas and now with Horizon projects FUTURAL and RURACTIVE recently launched they are turning to rural areas. By following the Smart Rural 27 project and participating in the Final Conference Matteo affirms to have found a lot of synergies with the main suggestion to create common activities (such as policy conferences, etc.) to achieve a bigger policy impact. He also indicates that for their organisations it is beneficial to network to understand needs in rural areas. He emphasised that almost all innovations are social in rural areas – very little technological and digital innovation, therefore “we must be careful with digital innovation because it should be an enabler, not a blocker” said Matteo, highlighting that it is still very important to introduce other kind of innovations.

Tom Jones (European Rural Community Alliance) indicated that over the past decade, a valuable asset – the Smart Village concept – has been created, and it's imperative that we safeguard it with a shared commitment to uphold it even after the project concludes. There must be clear accountability for its maintenance. With various funding streams and policy objectives in play, there's a pressing need for an organisation to take the lead, assuming a coordination role to ensure it isn't neglected. ERCA will continue its support, and the Rural Pact serves as an exceptional platform that should be extended to Member states and local levels. Smart Villages still require ongoing attention – as new ideas emerge, they must be shared, as well as lessons learned from past mistakes. Will Smart Villages in 2024 remain "smart" in 2029? Much work lies ahead, and it's crucial to assign responsibility. Without collective responsibility, there's a risk of it slipping through the cracks, underscoring the necessity for an appointed caretaker.

Goran Šoster (Partnership for Rural Europe – PREPARE) invites thinking each of participants about personal contribution that can be significant, especially within existing platforms. He invites to advocate for the idea of Smart Villages (SV) becoming a permanent theme, akin to LEADER in the European Rural Parliament (ERP). Additionally, it is possible to actively engage with projects like GRANULAR from the Horizon program, leveraging their potential to implement information sharing and disseminate best



practices in ongoing debates. He also states that ensuring a steady flow of information is crucial. If there is not a permanent source, efforts should be made to establish mechanisms for sourcing new activities and examples to inject into existing databases. Many Local Action Groups (LAGs) have already incorporated Smart Villages into their strategies, and accession countries could benefit from these tools as well. Promoting these ideas and facilitating their implementation can make a meaningful difference.

Āris Ādlers (Partnership for Rural Europe – PREPARE) invites to think about the Smart Villages concept as a tool to bring Rural Pact to the ground – make it local, as Smart Villages is an engine of activism at the local level and a tool to join other funds to the local activities.

Terry Stavropoulos (Joint Research Centre) suggests that the Smart Villages resource content can be passed on Rural Revitalisation platform. He also indicates that in a few months, there will be the first policy proposals for the next programming period available - we need to include Smart Villages and accompany it with support mechanisms, that will guide and support the communities. He noted that the Cohesion Policy legal framework can also support Smart Villages. He suggests making a report on Member states that support Smart Villages through Cohesion Policy - to understand under which programmes it would be most suitable. Also, he mentioned that it has been discussed how to create synergies between Start-up and Smart Villages and Rural Toolkit.

Silvia Nanni (European Commission, DG AGRI) confirmed that internal discussions are going on how to build on all the work done during both preparatory actions and how to bridge these initiatives with the Rural Pact.

Edina Ocsko concluded the discussion by acknowledging that the topics embraced by Smart Villages can fit well in Rural Pact and some other initiatives can be joined to support Smart Villages, as Rural Revitalization Platform. She also agreed that ownership would still be important to avoid falling into an endless discussion but move forward with action. She also emphasised that we have some months to keep this discussion alive, knowing that after it may start to fade if there are no new inputs.

3. Conclusions

The discussion highlighted the importance of continuing the efforts initiated by the *Smart Rural* projects beyond their completion. It emphasised the need for accountability and coordination to ensure the sustainability of the initiatives. While expressing gratitude for the support received, participants emphasised the necessity of ongoing commitment to keep the momentum going. The Rural Pact was acknowledged as a valuable platform for furthering these objectives, with an emphasis on individual responsibility and collective



action to maintain the progress achieved. The conversation concluded with a commitment to stay engaged and support each other in sustaining the valuable work accomplished.