



What LEADER LAGs need to support Smart Villages

This paper is developed as a discussion and background paper for the Final Conference, based on Smart Rural 27 outcomes. It is developed by the Contractor and does not reflect the official position of the European Commission.

The role of LEADER / CLLD in supporting Smart Villages has been stressed since the emergence of Smart Villages, including the initial ‘EU Action for Smart Villages’ (2017) and the ENRD’s Thematic Group (see factsheet on ‘How can LEADER/CLLD support Smart Villages?’, 2018). At the same time **the added value of Smart Villages** and how LEADER and Smart Villages complement each other has also been highlighted (see the Smart Rural 21 project Guidebook Chapter: ‘How the Smart Villages Concept is different from LEADER?’, 2022). According to the Smart Rural 27 analysis of 2023-2027 CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs), **Smart Villages is expected to be supported by LEADER in most CSPs**. Therefore, certainly LEADER will play a crucial role in supporting Smart Villages in the coming years.

While LEADER LAGs are often entrusted with the task to implement Smart Villages in their LAG areas; **many of them don’t yet know how to start working on Smart Villages** and comply with the CAP indicator R.40 indicator on ‘Number of Smart Village strategies’. Due to the relatively limited knowledge of LAGs on Smart Villages, one of the key recommendations of Smart Rural 27 has been **to provide specific guidance and capacity-building on Smart Villages to LAGs**. This is happening in a number of countries, such as Austria, Poland (within the Smart Rural 27 taskforce – see resources) and Greece.

Many LAGs across Europe have included Smart Villages in their LDSs, however, a wider comprehensive analysis is not yet available on how many LAGs included Smart Villages and how (although some countries, such as Austria under Smart Rural 27 taskforce, carried out an overview – see resources).

LEADER and Smart Villages build on the same principles. The main difference is between the geographical scope of action (see also Smart Rural 21 Guidebook). While LEADER is acting at a micro-regional level, **Smart Villages are realised at the local rural community** (rural municipalities, villages, small towns) **level**. Put it simply, supporting Smart Villages implementation means help **implementing the LEADER principles – including integrated local development strategy, bottom-up approach and innovation – at the local community level**. Furthermore, LAGs can play a key role in creating synergies between emerging (or existing smart) local plans/ strategies and the LDS, as well as help communities access various funding sources.

While LEADER has been acknowledged as a key instrument to support Smart Villages, **the lack of capacity of many LAGs to do so is also recognised as a challenge**. The ENRD (2018) highlighted the specific barriers that might impede LAGs to support local communities to become Smart Villages, such as increasing complexity and burden of administrative procedures for LAGs that leave little space for animation efforts, pressure to reach short-term results rather than thinking long-term, risk-aversion in supported projects, lack of capacity in LAGs covering large areas/ many communities, and lack of linkages to other (than CAP) funds.

During the current programming period, Member States seem not to have allocated additional funding to LAGs to implement Smart Villages and it is often considered that capacity building and preparatory actions supporting the design and implementation of the local development strategy is part of the tasks of LEADER LAGs¹. Therefore, **before committing to support Smart Villages, LAGs need to ask themselves the questions on whether they:**

“We are dealing with LEADER since 1995, and we noticed that in our region there is a bit of lack of the principles of LEADER. The projects are becoming less innovative, and participation is going down. So we need a new boost for the principles of LEADER, and Smart Village could be an approach which could help us in this process.” (LAG representative)

Smart Villages ‘tests’ the ability of LEADER LAGs on how far they can provide animation support for local stakeholders for the implementation of the LEADER principles.

¹ Article 34 of R. (EU) 2021/1060

- have enough **capacity** and human resources to animate Smart Village processes (strategy development, community engagement, project planning, etc.);
- are **ready to support new innovative (often risky) projects** in experimenting communities;
- can **help communities** to mobilise the right knowledge, expertise and funding to support innovative solutions (e.g. local innovation brokers).

Supporting Smart Villages means supporting communities with a vision and / or local people and organisations with a vision for the community.

Smart Villages support needs to place the local community needs and interests in the focus.

The three main areas where LEADER/ LAGs could typically support local communities are:

- **Capacity-building** for community engagement, (smart) planning/ strategy development and generating project ideas;
- **Technical support** for innovative projects in various thematic areas (that could be linked to all four priority areas of the Long Term Vision of Rural Areas);
- **Financial support** within CAP interventions or access to other EU & national funds.

Smart Rural 21 has worked with supporting communities in developing strategies and implementing small-scale pilot actions. **During the two Smart Rural projects a series of concepts, methods and tools have been developed that LEADER LAGs can use when supporting communities in their own areas** (see resources). The Smart Rural 21 project has defined a step-by-step process for communities to become a smart village (see table below). In terms of the support process of smart communities, two more steps could be added on selecting LAGs (0.) and facilitating cooperation (8).

Steps	Key steps in the LAG support process for Smart Villages
0. Identifying the right villages	LAGs need to identify communities that have the interest and the capacity to get engaged in the Smart Village process. This can be based on an ‘expression of interest’ & selection process (as in SR21).
1. Getting started	Leading figures and organisations in rural communities are needed to coordinate the SV process. SR21 directly worked with key individuals / organisations who prepared the initial proposal for the ‘expression of interest’ and who later – when selected coordinated the smart village process.
2. Mapping context & stakeholders	LAGs need to encourage local communities to better understand their local contexts and stakeholders to be engaged, including organising stakeholder events. These aspects need to be the basis of the smart village strategy.
3. Engaging stakeholders	LAGs need to ensure that the organisations/ individuals that lead the process, do it for the benefit (and with the engagement) of community members (participatory process).
4. Designing strategy	Some kind of strategic concepts and plans at the local community level are requirements for the Smart Village concept. The strategy represents the vision for the future of communities.
5. Prioritising & planning actions	Communities need to prioritise the actions within their strategies and indicate where they need support the most (action plan). The actions to be supported have to consider the scale and scope of support that can be provided through LEADER and/or other available EU and/or national funds.
6. Finding solutions	The LEADER LAGs might already have a good knowledge of what solutions are out there. However, additional technical expertise might have to be mobilised for the support of communities. LAGs can be inspired by the EU-wide collection of smart solutions.
7. Identifying financial and technical support	LAGs need to support the implementation of relevant Smart Village projects that are innovative and community-level, according to the community’s smart village strategy. Furthermore, LAGs could help communities to identify other relevant funding.
8. Seeking cooperation with others	Cooperation is crucial, as rural communities often best learn from their peers. LAGs have the important task to help create connections including cooperation with other LAGs (on the Smart Villages theme) with the engagement of communities and facilitate community-to-community exchange within the LAG territory and beyond.
9. Implementing solutions	LAGs need to support communities in implementing their projects (especially those financed through LEADER funding). This might include help with identifying the right expertise (technical support).
10. Monitoring actions & strategy	It is important to support local communities in monitoring their progress both in terms of strategy and in terms of project implementation, in particular the impact of the smart solutions on the local community and area.

General resources

Title of resource	Short description	Link
Analysis on ‘Smart Villages in the CAP’ by Smart Rural 27	National CAP & Smart Villages factsheets and synthesis of findings cross Europe	https://www.smartrural27.eu/cap-analysis/ (upcoming)
Smart Villages Stakeholder Platform of the European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory	Agenda, presentations and outcomes of discussions with LEADER Stakeholders on Smart Villages	https://www.smartrural27.eu/leader-platform/
Smart Rural 27 Analysis on Smart Villages in the Austrian LAGs’ LDSs	Analysis carried out in the framework of the Austrian Taskforce, reviewing Smart Villages in the LEADER LDSs	https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/ (see Austrian taskforce roadmap)
Smart Rural 27 Guide on LEADER and Smart Villages in Poland	Guide developed by experts contracted under Smart Rural 27, linked to the Smart Rural 27 Polish Taskforce work	https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/ (upcoming)
Smart Rural 27 Awareness-raising event on Smart Villages for LEADER LAGs in Hungary	Presentations on what Smart Villages are & how Smart Villages could be programmed within the LDSs	https://www.smartrural27.eu/smart-villages-taskforces/ (see Hungarian taskforce roadmap)

Step-by-step guidance to support the Smart Villages journey of communities

Key steps	Smart Rural material to use
0. Identifying / selecting the right villages	The Smart Rural 21 project used a specific application form and a series of primary and secondary criteria to assess expressions of interest . Primary criteria included: (1) Quality of existing strategic thinking/ intervention logic/ strategy, (2) Level of motivation (3), Level of human capacity, (4) Expected added value of the support for the village; secondary criteria included: (1) Level of technical & physical development, (2) Innovation potential, (3) Intention to cooperate & readiness to exchange experience in a transnational environment, (4) Level of transferability.
1. Getting started	Information on how Smart Rural 21 has worked with selected rural communities, can be found on the village pages of the project: https://www.smartrural21.eu/villages/ Tools on how communities can ‘get started’ (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-step/getting-started/ Self-assessment tool for communities on what questions to ask from the start (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-toolbox/self-monitoring-of-the-smart-village-strategy-design-and-implementation-process/
2. Mapping context & stakeholders	Smart Rural 21 Smart Village Strategy template and guidance include specific sections on local context / basic village characteristics: https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-toolbox/smart-village-strategy-template/ Tools on mapping context & stakeholders (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-step/mapping-context-stakeholders/ Smart Village Strategies examples (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap/smart-village-strategy/
3. Engaging stakeholders	Tools on stakeholder engagement (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-step/engaging-stakeholders/ Engagement self-assessment questions for communities (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-toolbox/self-monitoring-of-the-smart-village-strategy-design-and-implementation-process/
4. Designing strategy	Strategy design tools (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-step/designing-a-strategy/ Smart Village Strategies examples (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap/smart-village-strategy/ Examples of plans/ strategies of various communities under village profiles (Smart Rural 27): https://www.smartrural27.eu/geomapping-tool/

Key steps	Smart Rural material to use
5. Prioritising & planning actions	A basic action plan has been included in Smart Village Strategies: https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap/smart-village-strategy/ An action plan template has been prepared with communities when planning support under Smart Rural 21 (internal, further information can be provided upon request: smart-rural@e40.eu)
6. Finding solutions	Journey of small-scale technical support provided to villages available under each village page (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/villages/ Smart solutions database (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/smart-solutions/ Examples of smart solutions under village profiles (Smart Rural 27): https://www.smartrural27.eu/geomapping-tool/
7. Identifying financial and technical support	Currently the most comprehensive collection of possible funding sources at European Level is the Rural Toolkit (developed by DG REGIO & JRC): https://rural-vision.europa.eu/action-plan/cross-cutting/toolkit_en
8. Seeking cooperation with others	Smart Villages geomapping tool (SR27): https://www.smartrural27.eu/geomapping-tool/ Smart Café sessions for exchange (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/smart-rural-21-project/events/smart-cafe/ Smart Rural 27 knowledge clusters of rural communities on ‘renewable energy’ and ‘digital services’: https://www.smartrural27.eu/knowledge-clusters-of-smart-rural-communities/
9. Implementing solutions	Journey of small-scale technical support provided to villages available under each village page (Smart Rural 21): https://www.smartrural21.eu/villages/ Smart Rural 27 knowledge clusters of rural communities on ‘renewable energy’ and ‘digital services’: https://www.smartrural27.eu/knowledge-clusters-of-smart-rural-communities/
10. Monitoring actions & strategy	(Self-)monitoring tool on Smart Villages: https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-toolbox/self-monitoring-of-the-smart-village-strategy-design-and-implementation-process/

HOW LEADER COULD SUPPORT SMART VILLAGES

