Report on

European Stakeholder Platform meeting for

European organisations

27 February 2024, 9.30-11.15 CET

Online

Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century - Contract No: AGRI-2020-0332

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1. Context & Agenda

The purpose of the meeting was **to inform** European stakeholder organisations and networks **about the outcomes of the *Smart Rural 27* project and planning of the Final Conference** (held on 18-19 March 2024 in Brussels) and **to discuss possible synergies**.

13 participants registered from **9 European organisations and institutions**: European Commission, European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), COPA COGECA, Rural Communities Alliance (ERCA), European LEADER Association for Rural Development (ELARD), Fondazione Bruno Kessler (SMART ERA project), European Joint Research Centre (JRC), MeMex (SMARTA-NET project) and ECOLISE.

The proposed Agenda was as follows:

Time	Agenda item
9.30 - 10.00	**Presentation on the *Smart Rural 27*** project (including outcomes of other stakeholder meetings), main outcomes and presentation on the planning of the final conference, *by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 project Coordinator)*
10.00 – 11.00	**Sharing experiences among participants** on their interest/involvement in Smart Villages issues
11.00 - 11.15	Concluding remarks & next steps

2. Outcomes

2.1. Presentation on the Smart Rural 27 project & outcomes of other stakeholder meetings, *by Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 project Coordinator)*

Edina Ocsko presented the *Smart Rural 21* and *Smart Rural 27* projects and their outcomes and resources. Concerning the **Smart Rural 21 project** Edina presented how the development and implementation of Smart Villages strategies within rural communities across Europe was supported. She noted that the project received over 730 applications from communities interested in the concept, demonstrating a significant level of interest. Due to this overwhelming response, the number of supported villages (initially 17) was expanded to 21 and the project offered engagement opportunities to other communities through various means, including financial support for travel and participation in *Smart Rural 21* activities. This approach helped in building a robust community of rural villages actively involved in the project's initiatives. Edina highlighted the ongoing efforts to maintain connections with these communities even after the project's completion. One notable outcome mentioned was the project's website, which remains available and hosts valuable materials such as village journey factsheets and strategies. Additionally, Edina mentioned a key output from the project, a Guidebook summarising essential lessons learned from *Smart Rural 21* across various aspects and including references to the tools developed within the project. This document is available in multiple languages.

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. Edina elaborated on the **European Smart Villages Pilot Observatory**, describing it as a key networking mechanism which went beyond its initial scope due to the insights gained. The Observatory focused on three main aspects: (1) **Knowledge Clusters** for rural communities with two key topics identified as highly relevant for involved communities: renewable energy and digital services, (2) **National Taskforces** to foster dynamics within the national frame for better Smart Villages support policies and (3) **European Stakeholder platforms** to promote exchange between stakeholders with the same function / role across the Europe, such as the National CAP Networks, LEADER stakeholders, CAP Managing Authorities and European networks and institutions.

Edina Ocsko provided **an overview of the key outcomes and resources available on the** *Smart Rural 27* **project website**:

(1) Regular news updates are posted on the website, including podcasts featuring discussions with village representatives and experimental blog articles sharing stakeholder perspectives,

(2) more information about the Smart Villages Pilot Observatory, including meeting reports and presentations, can be found on the website,

(3) Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) analysis Report will soon be online, providing valuable insights and recommendations,

(4) Report on Smart Villages and the European Green Deal will be published soon,

(5) Database of Smart Communities: the website hosts a database of nearly 100 smart communities or villages in transition. These profiles provide information about the villages and their initiatives, selected based on specific criteria,

(6) Smart Inventory contains a collection of relevant resources, including outputs from both *Smart Rural 21* and *Smart Rural 27* projects. The inventory is searchable by keywords, making it easier for users to access specific resources.

Edina highlighted the potential synergies between the *Smart Rural 27* project and other initiatives such as Horizon projects like Smart Era, AURORAL and RURACTIVE, and other EU projects like SMARTA-NET. Smart Rural 27 has particular relevance for the Rural Pact, and the work of the EU CAP network, and has also linkages with the work of other EU institutions such as JRC. She also highlighted the synergies of Smart Villages with the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas, at the same time stressing the challenge of mobilising multiple funding sources for the support of rural communities. She invited participants for further discussion and collaboration to leverage the knowledge and tools from the Smart Rural projects, ultimately aiming to continue the momentum and impact of Smart Villages Pilot Observatory beyond the project's formal structure.

2.2. Sharing experiences among participants on their interest/involvement in Smart Villages issues

Terry Stavropoulos from the Joint Research Centre (JRC) introduced their involvement in the Smart Villages initiatives. JRC is closely following Smart Villages because they have 3 projects currently running that have synergies with the Smart Villages concept: (1) Startup Villages on innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas, (2) The Rural Toolkit which provides a concentrated overview for rural authorities and stakeholders on relevant programmes and funding opportunities that could contribute to financing Smart Villages strategies, (3) Rural Observatory that gathers data and analysis on ongoing processes in rural areas that we can call functional rural areas. Terry emphasised the potential for the Rural Toolkit to guide communities in breaking down strategies into individual projects and identifying suitable funding sources. He also mentioned the importance of sharing best practices and examples from *Smart Rural 27* to inspire other rural areas and contribute to addressing discontent in rural communities across Europe. Terry invited further collaboration and contributions to enhance the Rural Toolkit's effectiveness in providing comprehensive information and guidance on funding opportunities. During the discussion it has been highlighted that the Smart Rural 27 Lighthouse Factsheets (highlighting the use of multiple funds by communities) could be further promoted through the Rural Toolkit.

Silvia Nanni from European Commission (DG AGRI) expressed gratitude for the work done by the Smart Rural projects and emphasised the importance of exploring further opportunities beyond the current stage. Silvia acknowledged the value of community groups and platforms. Silvia also highlighted the value of the good practices and factsheets presented during the discussion, seeing them as beneficial for their work with the Long Term Rural Vision. She expressed interest in finding synergies between their initiatives and exploring opportunities for dissemination through their community newsletter. Silvia mentioned their participation in the Smart Rural 27 Final Conference – where a dedicated workshop is organised on how to support Smart Villages through wider policies as called for by the Rural Pact - and anticipated further discussions on synergies with the Rural Pact.

Maria-Christina Makrandreou from European Commission (DG AGRI) expressed gratitude for the ongoing discussions and emphasised the importance of keeping the network of Smart Villages created by the Smart Rural project vibrant. She mentioned that they are exploring all possibilities and are awaiting the Final Conference and report to understand recommendations and needs. Maria-Christina highlighted the value of exchanging ideas and identifying synergies, noting that both preparatory actions (*Smart Rural 21* and *Smart Rural 27*) were conducted to understand how the concept could be implemented on the ground. She noted that we are now in a different stage, especially regarding CAP Strategic Plans, and emphasised the need to monitor and assess how these plans will be implemented, considering the diversity across Member states. Maria-Christina mentioned the diversity in CAP Strategic Plans, highlighting varying focuses on digital aspects and social needs in different Member states. She emphasised the need for capacity building at all levels and expressed openness to hearing about possible scenarios at the EU level and discussing what comes next after the current contract ends.

Alessia Torre from Foundation Bruno Kessler (*SMART ERA project*) noted that their team within the SMART ERA Horizon Europe project is relatively new to the Smart Village community, having launched the project only a couple of months ago. She highlighted the presence of core partners from the Smart Village Project funded by Interreg Alpine Space in

their consortium, now also involved in the recently started Smart Community Project. This inclusion of active institutions underscores their commitment to engagement within the community. Alessia emphasised the importance of taking a comprehensive approach within their project, mentioning the need for a broad strategy that encompasses various aspects. She expressed enthusiasm about being part of the meeting and the final event to explore synergies and implement tools and platforms discussed. Alessia stressed their project's objective of co-designing and co-validating with rural communities in six pilot regions, with plans to expand in the future. She mentioned the development of "smart" innovation packages focusing on innovation in social, digital, governance, and business domains. Alessia expressed interest in adopting some of the Smart Rural tools presented and integrating them into their smart innovation packages for their communities, highlighting their openness to explore tools and synergies within the present stakeholder platform.

Brendan Finn from the _SMARTA-NET_ project highlighted that their project – where E40 is also a partner - is focused on rural mobility with three main strands: (1) Establishing the European Rural Mobility network by bringing together municipalities and stakeholders from 15 countries through webinars and conferences, (2) Developing guidance on four topics selected by the European Commission relevant for rural municipalities, (3) Creating training programmes with modules corresponding to the guidance documents. Brendan mentioned challenges in rural mobility, emphasising that it goes beyond what individual villages can manage due to the need for people to access other places, especially for work and services. He discussed the complexities of mobility, including scale, regulation, and high operational costs, making it challenging for villages to implement effective mobility solutions on their own. He highlighted the disconnection between the scale at which mobility solutions need to be implemented (often at the county or regional level) and the needs of individual villages or communities. Brendan raised questions about how villages can influence decision-making and funding allocation at higher government levels to address their mobility needs effectively. Overall, Brendan emphasised that while there is a wealth of information and networking opportunities within SMARTA-NET, there remains a challenge in bridging the gap between the scale of mobility solutions and the needs of rural communities.

3. Conclusions

During the conclusion of the meeting, Edina Ocsko outlined the plans for the _Smart Rural 27_ Final Conference, emphasising the importance of creating synergies and exchanging knowledge among participants. The Final Conference aims to showcase project achievements, facilitate connections, and enable ongoing collaboration beyond the event through live-streaming sessions and post-event discussions. Key agenda items of Day 1 include Lighthouse examples, National Taskforces, synergies with EU Green Deal and Digital cluster. On Day 2 Workshops will focus on discussing examples, sharing insights, and formulating recommendations for future support. In the concluding remarks, Edina Ocsko thanked all the participants for their contributions and active participation. She highlighted the importance of continued collaboration and information sharing among the participating countries to further support SV across Europe.

Funded by the