The first in a series of four planned Thematic Labs considered the ways that LEADER and Smart Villages can work together, focussing on the question: "How can LEADER effectively support Smart Village development?" Participants were updated on the key issues and lessons from the ENRD Thematic Group work on Smart Villages to date and DG AGRI shared the European Commission's perspective. Local practitioners gave examples demonstrating their varied experiences of how LEADER and Smart Villages have worked together in their Member States, highlighting the diverse interpretations of what a Smart Village can look like. Participants engaged in workshop discussions focussing initially on the barriers and risks for LEADER LAGs and ways these could be overcome. The afternoon session focussed on identifying the opportunities in the LEADER delivery framework to enable Smart Villages and how these can be carried forward and incorporated in CAP Strategic Plans.

Event Information

Title: LEADER Thematic Lab: Working with Smart Villages
Date: 17 October 2019
Location: Brussels, Belgium
Organiser: ENRD Contact Point
Participants: Representatives of LEADER LAGs, National Rural Networks, delegates from Managing Authorities of the RDPs and EU institutions (DG AGRI).
Outcomes: Practical examples and exchanges between participants on the success factors and basic conditions needed to support Smart Village development through LEADER.
Website: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/enrd-leader-thematic-lab-smart-villages_en

Setting the scene

Presentations from the ENRD CP, DG AGRI and four EU Member States introduced various perspectives on how LEADER can work with Smart Villages. Peter Toth (ENRD CP) provided a short summary of relevant briefing papers and stakeholder perspectives which emphasised community benefits, bottom-up development and innovation as key elements of a Smart Village process. Paul Soto (ENRD CP) provided an overview of the Smart Villages thematic work. Based on lessons learnt to date, the main emphasis when working with Smart Villages is on social innovation and the process of the transition from a 'regular' into a 'smart' village where each and every step on the 'innovation ladder' can potentially be supported by LEADER.

Karolina Jasinska-Muehleck (DG AGRI) referred to the Smart Village objective as an opportunity to carry out a fitness check of LEADER, for it has always been called to support innovation processes and should continue to do it to its full potential. Some delivery mechanisms already available for LAGs (such as Simplified Cost Options based on draft budget) are particularly relevant to offer flexible, simple to manage and quick funding so needed to support smart transition of villages. Participants were reminded that under the future CAP there would be no LEADER specific eligibility restrictions as long as operations contribute to the policy objectives. In addition, EU Member States would have more freedom to design LEADER support, including control systems. This should allow ensuring that delivery mechanisms are coherent with the LEADER approach and supportive of the objectives it should follow. There will be a limited set of EU level indicators in order to monitor the performance of the policy.

Member State perspectives

Finland is at the forefront of LEADER activities supporting Smart Villages with a large number of LAGs specialising in a broad range of themes including e-health services, digitalisation of rural services, e-learning, digital tutor projects and more. Marianne Selkainaho (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland) provided an overview of relevant actions and described how digitalisation and 'smart' concepts are being integrated in the long-running village action movement in Finland through a combination of a bottom-up approach, knowledge transfer, pilot projects, Simplified Costs Options and through the involvement of the Village Action Association of Finland. The 'Smartest Village of Finland 2020' competition also raises awareness and is energising relevant local stakeholders. For LAG Natradalen in Sweden, supporting Smart Villages is their core business. The LEADER staff play a key role in providing relevant support, creating opportunities for people to meet and promoting learning for changing attitudes. In all the actions that they promote the partnership between private, civil and public sectors is encouraged. LEADER action groups in Catalonia implement cooperation and strategic projects for Smart Villages focussed on co-working, energy efficiency and climate. The regional network for rural development in Catalonia (ARCA) acts as a facilitator on a regional scale helping to connect local, regional and national levels and to build alliances to overcome rural challenges. More than 20 LAGs in Romania are launching a cooperation project to prepare the landscape of their 'smartification' potential and examine what actions are needed to maximise this potential.

Barriers and challenges

Participants broke into two groups to discuss the barriers and challenges LEADER LAGs faced when working with Smart Villages. Identifying what exactly a 'Smart Village' is may be seen as a barrier, but the breadth and fluidity of the definition may in fact be very valuable – Smart Villages are a process, a journey, not a destination and each should reflect their own particular local needs. However, this wider scope of Smart Villages, beyond the themes that LEADER has traditionally supported, brings with it the challenge of developing new partnerships that look outwards and increase local knowledge. It requires openness to change, a catalyst to spark the demand, 'enablers' within the community and demonstrable benefits to encourage engagement and commitment. Challenging questions include: where do Smart Villages fit within a LEADER strategy, as a cross-cutting element or stand alone, and which resources should be used to support Smart Villages and how should these be acquired? Various solutions for financing Smart Villages were identified, Simplified Cost Options were suggested (draft budget in particular) and the use of a single (rather than multiple) European Structural and Investment fund, thus making the process more straightforward.

Key success factors for LEADER and Smart Villages

Key success factors identified and discussed by participants included the stronger role of LAGs; involving relevant stakeholders; the integration of Smart Villages objective in programming; providing appropriate financial support; sharing knowledge and expertise; strong animation and a local vision for Smart Villages. Participants agreed that Smart Village development should be viewed as a process of social innovation with multiple stages in which the LAGs should provide strong animation support and help develop the local vision in order to energise relevant stakeholders. This requires a stronger mandate for LAGs to engage with stakeholders and networks 'outside of LEADER', to act as innovation brokers and draw in relevant expertise from the research community, including universities. A simple financial framework (including Simplified Cost Options) should be ensured. The integration of the Smart Villages theme in relevant EU, national and local programming documents, as well as using the appropriate indicators and selection criteria – e.g. linked to collective projects by LAGs and social innovation – are also important factors.

Conclusions and next steps

The closing plenary reflected on the great examples presented that demonstrated LEADER and Smart Villages working together on the ground. Emphasis was placed on collective innovation as a process, on capacity building and that Smart Villages can potentially contribute to the essence of what LEADER LAGs are trying to do. The group agreed that there is a need to get Smart Village thinking into CAP Strategic Plans and then translate this into LEADER Local Development Strategies. There was an awareness that Smart Villages need to bring something different to villages. Possible mechanisms to do this are cooperation, bringing in external expertise and the use of financial instruments to make the process better, easier and faster. As one delegate described it: 'Smart Villages are made up of many things that are already there – you just need to shift the dots'.

Participants shared how they were going to use their new knowledge: through strategic discussions amongst LAGs (Sweden), in engaging with municipalities that set up associations for integrated development (Romania) and communicating outside the LEADER community (Belgium). Smart Villages were also identified as supplementing 'just transition' and climate change actions. The ENRD CP provided information about the upcoming LEADER Thematic Lab on climate change mitigation and adaptation and the next meeting of the ENRD Thematic Group on Smart Villages.

ENRD Resources and Tools

LEADER Resources
Your gateway to the LEADER knowledge gathered on the ENRD website: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/leader-clld/leader-resources_en

How can LEADER/CLLD support Smart Villages?
A briefing exploring the potential role of LEADER/CLLD in supporting the implementation of the Smart Villages concept: https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/smart-villages-how-can-leaderclld-support-smart-villages_en

How to support Smart Villages strategies which effectively empower rural communities?
Preliminary orientations on how to support Smart Villages – both now and in the future.
https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/publications/smart-villages-how-support-smart-villages-strategies-which-effectively-empower-rural_en