



European Network for
Rural Development

Smart Villages Event Highlights

9th Thematic Group meeting

The ninth meeting of the Thematic Group (TG) brought together 40 stakeholders, including Managing Authorities from 10 Member States. Participants visited two of the villages participating in the Smartest Villages [competition](#) in Finland, Vähikkälä and Teuro-Kuuslammi villages, and discovered their visions for the future.

The Finnish Managing Authority presented their proposal for supporting these and other Finnish villages through a dedicated future framework for Smart Villages. At the core of their proposal are new forms of cooperation complementary with LEADER/CLLD, a network of rural innovation brokers and the extensive use of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs). The meeting also showed that there are many Member States (MSs) exploring how to programme Smart Villages in the future CAP Strategic Plans and Cohesion Policy and that further exchanges are needed to learn from each other.

Event Information

Date: 19-20 November 2019

Location: Vähikkälä and Teuro-Kuuslammi, Finland.

Participants: 40 participants - including EU institutions, Managing Authorities, National Rural Networks, European organisations, Local Action Groups (LAGs), local authorities, stakeholder organisations and researchers.

Outcomes: Insights on possible interventions in the future CAP Strategic Plans for supporting Smart Villages.

Website: [9th TG meeting on Smart Villages](#)

The vibrant village movement in Finland

[Sami Tantarimäki & Elina Leppänen](#) (Finnish Village Movement Association) introduced the long-standing Finnish village movement that emerged in the seventies. The association is currently composed of more than 4 000 village associations, organised into provincial associations and one national umbrella organisation. The Village Movement Association carries out advocacy for community-led local development (CLLD) and aims to build community well-being and enhance public participation. Since 2003, local village associations have been eligible for public support which they use for promoting and developing village level actions.

The Thematic Group visited two traditional Finnish villages which are taking part in the Finnish Smart Villages competition - [Vähikkälä](#) village (450 inhabitants) and [Teuro-Kuuslammi](#) village (250 inhabitants). In both villages there are active village associations which implement interesting local [initiatives](#). The villages have developed a strong sense of community over the years and have explored alternative solutions for maintaining key services such as the village schools from threats of closure. They have managed to keep the schools open and now they are the core of the village life. In both cases the continued existence and dynamism of the local schools has helped to attract new families and young people.

In their vision for the future, both villages wish to continue expanding the range of services provided to their community in smarter and more efficient ways, mainly through multi-functional centres, which are often focussed around the local school. They also aim to attract remote workers by offering a range of services that allow them and their families to live and work more comfortably in the village.



TG members in Vähikkälä school - exchange with teachers.



Supporting Smart Villages with the future CAP SP: [The Finnish proposal](#)

[Stefan Ostergard](#) (DG AGRI) explained that the new legal framework will allow greater flexibility for Member States to design interventions for Smart Villages. He insisted that there is no single model for doing this and that MSs should adapt interventions to the specific needs of their rural communities.

Finland is one of the most advanced countries in its thinking about possible support to Smart Villages through the future CAP Strategic Plans. [Marianne Selkäinaho](#) (FI Managing Authority) explained how they are planning to capture the needs of villages like the ones visited and to add value to [existing instruments](#). She also introduced the main ideas of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture for supporting Smart Villages under the Specific Objective 8 of the future CAP Strategic Plan. Their proposed support framework is made up of a package of specific interventions to be applied at different levels, namely i) 'Smart Villages cooperation projects' at a local village level, ii) Thematic [Smart Villages activation projects](#) covering a wider range of villages in one or more LAGs, iii) the networking of [innovation brokers](#) through the National Rural Network and iv) Flexible finance through the extensive use of [Simplified Cost Options \(SCOs\)](#).

SV Cooperation projects (local village level)



The idea behind SV cooperation projects is to extend the scope of innovation support as provided by EIP-AGRI Operational Groups (OGs) beyond agri-food to other rural sectors and fields (e.g. energy, mobility, education and digitalisation, etc). Cooperation projects will be based on 'local action plans' which aim to provide fast and flexible support for the implementation of innovative actions that respond to a specific local challenge or need. This takes place at a very local level through the cooperation of 1-2 villages or several actors (e.g. village movement associations and other actors such as a research institutes, SMEs and public authorities).

Preparatory support for the development of the plan is also envisaged. SV cooperation projects will contribute to the result indicator 'R.33 - % of rural population covered by a supported SV strategy'.

Network of innovation brokers



A Smart Villages network will be created involving both the villages themselves and the innovation brokers. In the current proposal, the National Rural Network would coordinate this and offer guidance, animation, and share information / 'know-how' through meetings, seminars and other networking activities between the villages and brokers.

[Taina Saino](#) (LAG) provided a real example of how LEADER works now and how it might contribute to supporting Smart Villages. Marianne Selkäinaho also provided further insights on the links with investment [measures](#) and lessons from EIP-AGRI OGs.

SV/Countryside Activation projects (wider level)



These are long-term umbrella and/or theme projects that aim to animate and promote innovation between groups of villages on cross-cutting issues such as digitalisation and broadband connectivity, the networking and clustering of SMEs and so on. These projects need to achieve a critical mass in order to become sustainable and can span one or more LAG areas.

Innovation brokers will play the role of match-makers, linking local 'know-how' with external sources of knowledge and innovation.

Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) will be used in both the SV cooperation and the activation projects to make it easier for local communities to apply for projects. The activation projects will contribute to output indicator 'O.28 - Number of cooperation groups – excluding EIP OG reported under O.1'.

Flexible finance (Simplified Cost Options)



[Kati Vaissalo](#) (Paying Agency) explained the Finnish experience of implementing SCOs and particularly the advantages of using lump sums with draft budgets.

This allows LAGs to assess project budgets of up to 100 000 EUR on a case-by-case basis, simplifies applications and makes the payment process "*easy, simple and fast*". It is often useful to divide projects into various phases or components. However, the method is not suitable for all projects. In Finland, the close relationship with the [ELY](#) provincial offices makes it easier to identify and apply the best approach.

Programming Smart Villages in other countries. Key questions for future discussion:

- > **Ensuring added value and avoiding duplication.** Certain Member States like Finland and Poland are considering free standing cooperation interventions for Smart Villages, while others like Austria and Ireland seem inclined to rely primarily on LEADER/CLLD.
- > **Building bridges with pilot schemes and national strategies.** Several countries like Germany and the Czech Republic are embarking on pilot initiatives while others such as [Italy](#) and [Spain](#) have national strategies which are very relevant for Smart Villages. How can MSs ensure synergy with these initiatives, better alignment with other sources of investment and strategies, such those for urban areas?

