

Event report:
Linkages between the European Green
Deal & Smart Villages

30 June 2023 10:00-12:00 CET
Online



Preparatory Action - Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century -
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1. Context of the event

1.1. Purpose

On 30 June 2023, E40, in partnership with ECOLISE, hosted an online event within the framework of the Smart Rural 27 project. It was intended for all stakeholders interested in learning more about the Green Deal and Smart Villages from a practical point of view. The key question addressed was:

How can European Green Deal (EGD), Farm to Fork & Biodiversity strategies support the emergence of Smart Villages and how Smart Villages can contribute to the goals of the EGD?

During the event, initial findings were presented of the Smart Rural 27 research project on ‘**Smart Villages contribution to the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity strategies**’. The aim was to gather initial feedback and responses from interested stakeholders and offer the opportunity for learning and discussion with guest speakers from Smart Villages and thematic breakout sessions.

1.2. Target audience

The event targeted stakeholders at all levels interested in the Green Deal and Smart Villages: rural communities/villages/entrepreneurs, local authorities, LEADER LAGs, European policy makers, students and academics.

70 participants from **22 countries** (see Figure 1) were registered to attend the event with the most represented country – Belgium, including representatives from European institutions, networks and local stakeholders.

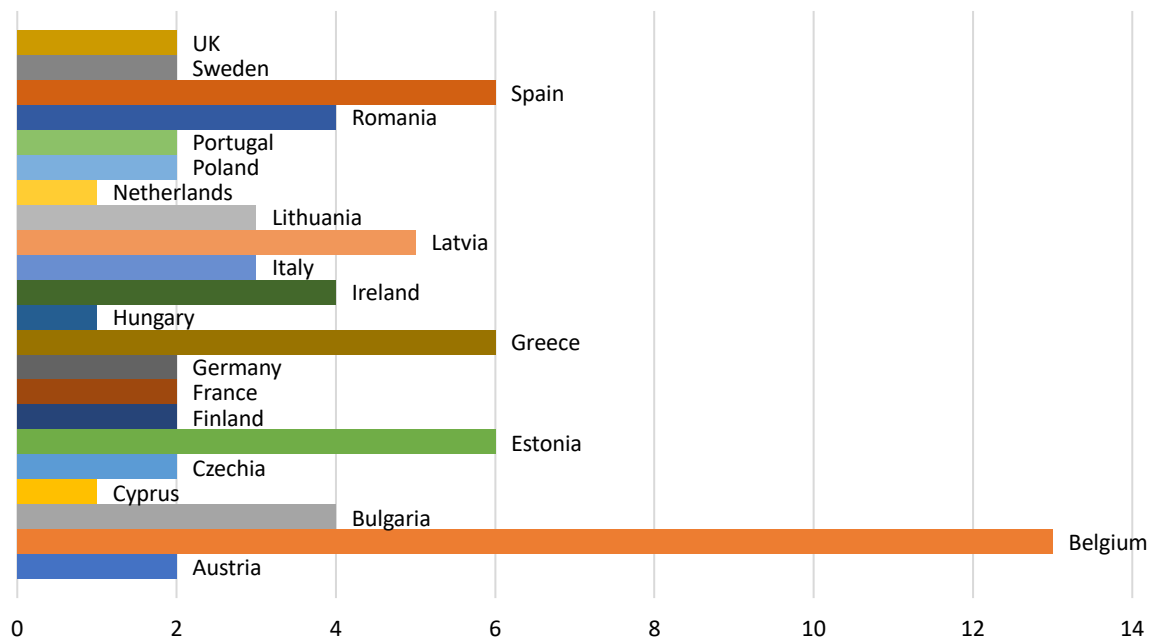


Figure 1 : Registered participants by countries

A variety of stakeholders from local to European level were registered to the event (see Figure 2). The most represented type of organisation was rural

communities/municipalities/villages with 10 representatives, followed by European institutions with 9 representatives and private companies that includes consulting companies on rural development at European and local level, as well as, local enterprises implementing smart solutions. National stakeholders were represented by CAP and other Managing authorities as well as CAP Networks.

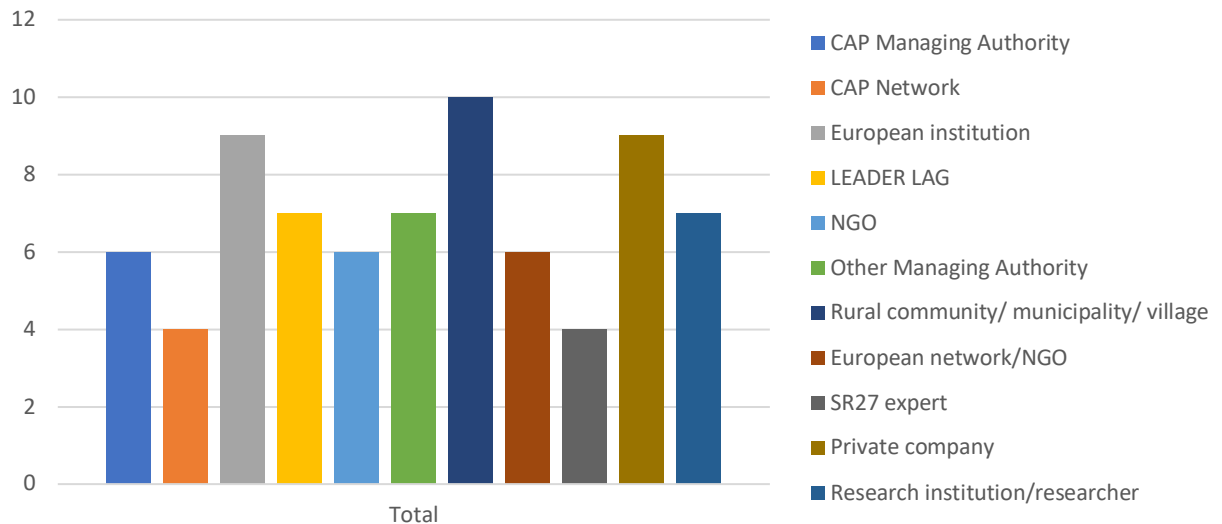


Figure 2: Registered stakeholders by type of organisation

1.3. Agenda

10:00 – 10:30 Introduction: Smart Rural 27 & The Green Deal Research

- Introduction to the Smart Rural 27 meeting, purpose & outcomes of the Green Deal survey with participants, by *Edina Ocsko (E40, Smart Rural 27 Project Coordinator)*
- Examples of linkages between SV and the EGD in CAP Strategic Plans, by *Katrina Idu (E40, Smart Rural 17 Assistant Project Coordinator)*
- Introduction to the Green Deal Study and initial findings, by *Jane Feeney (Ecolise, Smart Rural 27 partner)*

10:30 – 11:00 Presentations on Smart Villages' contribution to the Green Deal

- Smart Villages' contribution to Farm-to-Fork, by *Piotr Ostaszewski (Tomaszyn, Poland)*
- Smart Villages' contribution to biodiversity - the BioMap initiative, by *Cécile Mestrez (GAL Meuse Campagnes, Belgium - Wallonia)*

11:00 – 11:40 Discussion groups

- Smart Villages & Biodiversity
- Smart Villages & Farm-to-Fork
- Smart Villages & Climate Action

11:40 – 12:00 Wrapping up & next steps in the preparation of the study

2. Outcomes of the event: Linkages between the European Green Deal & Smart Villages

2.1. Introduction: Smart Rural 27 & The Green Deal Research

- Introduction to the Smart Rural 27 meeting, purpose & outcomes of the Green Deal survey with participants

Edina Ocsko, Project Coordinator of Smart Rural 27, opened the session with welcome remarks before kicking off by introducing the concept and EU definition of "Smart Villages". Reflecting on the learnings coming out of the Smart Rural 21 and Smart Rural 27 projects, she highlighted some key features among smart communities in practice: evidence of **strategic thinking** and a **future-looking vision**; the combination of different measures in an **integrated way**; they operate at a **local and rural** level (not necessarily defined by size or name); they use **modern knowledge and technologies** as much as possible and involve local people (**social innovation** as well as digital innovation); and they aim to **make a change** in response to pressing global challenges. Edina underlined these points by providing practical examples from smart villages (Ostana, Italy, and Stanz, Austria).



Figure 3: Edina Ocsko presenting the introduction to the workshop

Participants were asked how far they agree with specific statements on Smart Villages & the European Green Deal. A majority of respondents to the Mentimeter tool during the event voted that *Smart Villages is an interesting new concept that opens new opportunities* (4.3/5), that *there is a strong connection between Smart Villages and the European Green Deal (EGD)* (3.8/5), and that *the EGD has strong potential to support Smart Villages financially and in other terms* (3.8/5). However, most participants felt that communities do not have good access to EGD and EU funds (See Figure below).

How far do you agree with the following statements?



Figure 4: Event participants' responses: How far do you agree with the following statements?

Edina then explained the different activities of the Smart Rural 27 project, including the European Smart Villages Observatory, knowledge cluster on Renewable Energy Communities, lighthouse examples and database of Smart Villages, and upcoming documentaries.

Katrina Idu, Assistant Project Coordinator of Smart Rural 27, presented an overview of an analysis of EU Member States' CAP Strategic Plans to explore linkages between the EU Green Deal actions and Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans, with examples from Poland, Italy and Croatia.



Figure 5: Katrina Idu presenting linkages between SV and the EGD in CAP Strategic Plans

Edina then presented the results of the survey event participants participated in as part of the event registration.

- **Introduction to the Green Deal Study and initial findings**

Jane Feeney, consultant with ECOLISE, presented the initial findings of the research into the linkages between the Green Deal and Smart Villages. She noted that the Green Deal's key themes are represented across the Smart Rural 21 and 27 databases, with clean energy, biodiversity, farm-to-fork, and circular economy as some of the most common themes

represented in smart village activities and solutions. She presented some of the key themes and categories emerging across smart solutions (innovativeness, local context, enabling factors, results and lessons learned).



Figure 6: Jane Feeney presenting the initial findings of Smart Villages & the Green Deal study

2.2. Presentations on Smart Villages' contribution to the Green Deal

- **Piotr Ostaszewski (Tomaszyn): Smart Villages' contribution to Farm-to-Fork**

Piotr Ostaszewski from [Tomaszyn](#), Poland, one of the Smart Rural 21 villages, spoke about their work in regenerative agriculture and bringing back the value to the land and to the products through the [Ostoja Natury Cooperative](#). "Once you establish high-quality products, the only way really to sell it is in the Farm-to-Fork line, basically, to sell direct to customers without any third parties in between, so that's what we are doing.", Piotr said. He acknowledged the significant impact of farming on the climate and the role of farmers in climate action, through approaches such as regenerative farming. He said social, economic and ecological aspects of agriculture must be considered together to address all challenges, such as attracting young people into farming and making it economically viable and ecologically sustainable.

- **Cécile Mestrez (GAL Meuse Campagnes, Belgium - Wallonia): Smart Villages' contribution to biodiversity - the BioMap initiative**

Cécile Mestrez from [GAL Meuse Campagnes](#), a local action group (LAG) in Belgium-Wallonia, pointed out the many similarities between LAGs and Smart Villages. She explained the challenges faced in the local community, such as inadequate water quality and impoverished soil due to demographic pressures. "We choose to work on developing the interconnectivity of the ecological network and social network at the same time and create a collaborative environmental mapping of the territory", said Cécile.

She pointed out the challenge of accessing data in a user-friendly way, the lack of tools to identify and manage the ecological network at a local level, and that the work of citizens is often not visible or connected. In response, they developed [BiomMap](#) – an open-source tool that provides a simple and user-friendly way to improve and contribute to a finer picture of the local ecological network.



Figure 7: Cécile Mestrez presenting the BiomMap solution

2.3. Parallel discussion groups

Three thematic breakout groups (climate, biodiversity, and farm-to-fork) were created to discuss the following three questions:

- Consider the **Smart Villages features** (strategic approach based on addressing the pressing challenge of climate change, innovation, community engagement & social impact): Do you know any local communities that have a strong approach in [*biodiversity/ farm-to-fork/ other EGD themes*] and could be considered as a Smart Village? Why?
- Which are the **EGD funding sources** (or other support) that are suitable for local communities (“villages”)?
- **What can be done more** (e.g. through SR27) to make sure that funding/political support reaches rural communities?

Biodiversity Discussion Group

Workshop focused on the possible contribution of Smart Village to biodiversity strategy goals. The basis of the discussion was set during the main session with the intervention on the BioMap initiative by Cécile Mestrez representing LAG Meuse Campagnes in Belgium – Wallonia.

Summary of key questions discussed:

- The difficulties in achieving changes in agricultural practices from conventional and profit-driven farming towards more biodiversity-driven farming (**difficulty of changing mindsets** and farming habits), but farmers engagement is crucial to drive changes to increase biodiversity at the local level.
- Nature preservation and restoration policies can be seen as restrictive (e.g. Nature Restoration Law) instead of being enablers for change. Small and focused initiatives engaging local stakeholders, like the BioMap initiative, can bring these policies closer to people.

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- Political agenda is very tuned to EU Green Deal goals, but without the ownership of local stakeholders and with a lack of collaboration between them, none of the regional or national driven initiatives can be sustainable.
- Everything in nature is now human-influenced: ***How is it possible to reconcile human and nature and reach the objective of increasing biodiversity?*** The key finding of the BioMap initiative was to carry out information and motivation work with all types of stakeholders: farmers, landowners, local authorities, and other citizens. Working together on a concrete action is a good way to improve the social cohesion around the biodiversity topic, and the village level, with its identity, ensures good ground for a sense of belonging and increased ownership for common goals.
- How to measure the impact of biodiversity actions? First, the role of technologies in biodiversity actions was emphasised. It was stated that technology is nothing without people reappropriating it and that the digital part of biodiversity initiatives is important (an example of the National Biodiversity Data Centre in Ireland was mentioned). It was also suggested to look at the economic benefit of these actions not only in terms of money earned but to look at the local economic impact through the community savings created by the reduction of possible nature disasters, e.g. flood impact on local infrastructure, including private housing, or set a vision with local stakeholders on how increased biodiversity could profit their village objectives, e.g. increased tourism for wildlife watching.
- Finally, participants mentioned the importance of continuity of funding for biodiversity actions and the diversification of resources, including private funding, because reaching biodiversity goals is a long-term mission.

The key message: To carry out successful biodiversity actions at the local level, mindset change, collaboration between various local stakeholders, diversification of financial resources and measurable common goals are crucial. Smart villages can be considered a valuable tool in reaching the goals of the EU Biodiversity Strategy if increasing biodiversity at local level becomes one of the objectives of a local strategy, gathering people around a common vision of their village development.

Farm-to-Fork Discussion Group

In the discussion group, Piotr Ostaszewski gave a deeper explanation of the Farm-to-Fork strategy at Ostoja Natury Cooperative. They do this using three models: through a network of point-of-sale BioBazaars where they sell products all year around; a subscription model, which he described as "the best farming model" and provides an income even during low seasons; and "Picnic from Nature" which is about bringing people together at events to try the food and become educated about what they do. There is interest from other areas of Poland, but it is currently only economically viable to sell within the regional area.

- Technology and the mechanisation of farming have replaced the cooperation that existed in traditional rural farming communities and replaced human labour. This has led to outward migration from rural areas in search of employment and left farmers more isolated.
- Rachel from Inishowen, Ireland, commented that rural farmers are disconnected and lack funding, and a cooperative model could be helpful. Piotr shared that the cooperative is run entirely through private funding. They have not received any other financial support but have had the opportunity to exchange knowledge through the Smart Rural project, which has been valuable.

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- Knowledge exchange is crucial but a big challenge, where misinformation and disinformation are barriers. Practical knowledge is essential in regenerative farming, not just scientific or academic knowledge. A best practice example mentioned is the [Market Gardener Institute](#) in Canada, which educates and empowers growers through practical courses. There is a need for practical knowledge that is accessible, especially for young people who need low-key infrastructure and a fast return on investment.
- It was stressed the importance of bringing people to the farms where they can have an *experience* and see, feel, pick and taste the food directly.

Climate Discussion Group

The **workshop on Climate Action** aimed to explore possible local responses to ‘climate change’, especially in the field of renewable energy (aligned with the knowledge cluster work of the Renewable Energy Cluster of the Smart Rural 27 project).

At the start Edina Ocsko (E40, project coordinator) provided some further information on the [Stanz](#) Energy Cluster and Token-system in response to questions.

Participants highlighted **relevant local examples** they are aware of such as:

- **Eole Modave in Modave Municipality** (50% citizens and 50% municipality owned model) was born out of the desire of the Commune of Modave and Engie Electrabel – as explained by Jean-Francois Pecheur (LAG Condruces) - to work together on wind power in Modave. Currently, they also want to invest into own wind turbines and solar system (PV) and also into storage system to be owned by the municipality. They aspire to be “0-carbon” municipality.
- The [Island of Samsø](#) (Denmark) and [Haradsback \(Sweden\)](#) – lighthouse examples of the Smart Rural 27 project – has been highlighted by Hans-Olof Stalgren.

Funding opportunities for small communities came up as a critical point:

- *Marianne Selkainano (Finnish Ministry/ Managing Authority)*: Smart Villages implementation just started in Finland. There is great interest in both Smart Villages and the Green Deal. More information will come in August as applications are coming in. In Finland, Smart Villages focus on concrete (project) plans (not complex strategies), not to make it too high-level. Can be funded from LEADER but also by the Regional Authorities. There are three big focus areas: social, environmental and economic innovations. Therefore, environmental innovation is an important component.
- *Ilvija Asmane (Latvian LAG)*: In Latvia, Smart villages will be support through LEADER, LEADER funding can be allocated to this purpose on a voluntary basis (it depends on the LAG).
- In Sweden Smart Villages support is possible through LEADER (Hans-Olof Stalgren, SE SR27 National Expert). At the same time, in the case of some of the interventions such as on biodiversity, wetlands, cooperation/ AKIS (connected to food production / food chains/ hospitality services) etc. – the beneficiaries could be also municipalities. It is possible to access these funds.
- *Greece (Maria Chacharidaki, Greek Managing Authority)*: Ministry needs to provide legal and technical support. Renewable energy communities can be formed between

three or four farmers (only) in Greece. Framework needs to be opened up to local authorities and municipalities and other stakeholders of the private sector. LEADER is also an option also in Greece.

- *EIP-AGRI should be considered (Katarina Kubinakova, SK/MT SR27 National Expert), this nicely links also to the Green Deal.*

2.4. Feedback on workshop findings & panel discussion

Daniela Rizzi from ICLEI Europe praised the work and commented that from her perspective, villages can do amazing work for biodiversity and help to shift the change to nature positive. Jean-François Pecheur from LAG Pays des Condruses (Belgium) commented that it would be interesting to dig deeper into the topics, for example, on the theme of blockchain, to have dedicated in-person workshops or masterclasses to allow more in-depth discussions into individual topics. Edina responded that there will be opportunities for greater engagement through the European Smart Village Pilot Observatory and encouraged people to get involved.

Edina closed the meeting with the next steps for the research report and invited comments and inputs from the audience.