

Interreg Alpine Space



SmartVillages Policy Recommendations

The Smart Villages Project is a strategic implementation initiative of the Macroregional strategy for the Alpine area EUSALP. The project is running from 2018 to 2021 and is financed by the Interreg Alpine Space Program. The Policy Recommendations coming out of this project are thus a major contribution to the implementation of EUSALP. The draft recommendations were elaborated in autumn 2020 by the project consortium. Basis was a survey carried out amongst the 13 partners of the project coming from all Alpine countries. The draft recommendations were presented and discussed at the International Smart villages policy conference of 10th November 2020 with 150 participants from all over Europe. Initially, this meeting was meant to be a physical meeting to be held in Bern (CH). But due to the Covid-19-situation, the meeting was reorganised into a virtual-only meeting. The draft recommendations have been amended after the discussion at the International Smart Villages policy conference. They will flow into the policy cycle of the Macroregional strategy for the Alpine region EUSALP and will be made available to policy makers in the Alpine area and outside of it like the other Macroregional strategies, the EU Commission, Managing authorities and so on.

The Smart-villages-approach is important for villages in mountain and rural areas to become more attractive and vibrant. Smart villages are not only attractive for residents, but also for people from outside, who may stay in these villages for a certain period either as tourists or for work (concept of “third places” with e.g. coworking spaces). In this respect, the concept of Smart villages helps also to create linkages between urban and rural areas. The Smart-villages-approach helps those villages to use the potentials offered by digitalization and to bridge the natural handicaps of distances. With the Smart-villages-approach, the communities can contribute to the European Green Deal and master their smart transformation. And last but not least, the Covid-19-crisis has shown that Smart villages are much more resilient to such crisis.

The Smart-Village-approach is an integrative approach using the potentials offered by digitalization and developing new solutions through participatory processes, thus relying on open and social innovation. This basic understanding of the Smart-Village-approach leads to the following policy recommendations. These policy recommendations address all institutional levels ranging from EU-level, through macroregional level to national, regional and local level. Where appropriate, the respective level is directly addressed and good examples are given.

R1: Consider the smart transformation of mountain, rural and peripheral villages as a strategic priority

The smart transformation of mountain and rural villages helps to bridge the natural handicaps of those areas and give them new perspective. In some mountain areas, with low population density, the Smart Villages concept can also help to develop digital services and mobility offers for instance,

while operators have been reluctant to invest in local infrastructure projects that are not viable. The smart transformation of those areas should therefore become a strategic priority. At the EU-level, a strong focus is already put on this topic with amongst others the EU Action plan on Smart villages, the activities carried out by the ENRD Network on Smart villages and the new intergroup RUMRA & Smart villages in the EU Parliament. This intergroup is an ideal platform to evaluate, whether it would be appropriate to create an explicit legal basis or an overarching strategy for the Smart villages-approach at EU-level. At macroregional level (EUSALP), Smart villages is considered as one of the five strategic priority policy areas for the period 2020 - 22. This is already a major success of the ongoing smart villages ASP-project. The creation of a network of Smart villages in the Alpine area is envisaged in 2021. The seven countries and 48 regions represented in EUSALP are invited to actively support this process. At national level, several countries have already integrated the Smart villages approach into national strategies, such as the “Strategie digitale Schweiz” in Switzerland and the Strategy for Inner areas in Italy or the rural development program of Slovenia. At regional level, the Smart villages approach must also become a priority, such as e.g. with the Law on digital transformation in Graubünden (CH). The same holds of course true at municipal level, as exemplified by the city of Tengen in Germany.

R2: Embed Smart villages in existing and future strategies and policies

The Smart-villages-approach is an inter-sectorial approach. It covers many thematics ranging from e.g. tourism and mobility to E-Government and to energy. It is therefore crucial, that the Smart-villages-approach is embedded in the existing and future policies. The Smart Villages concept should e.g. be integrated into Pillar II of the CAP and in the Cohesion policy (including crossborder cooperation) and a certain budget allocated to it. The Rural development programs for the period 2021-2027 including the LEADER/CLLD-approach should have a strong focus on digitalisation and open/social/technical innovations. As regards the Cohesion policy, the operational programs at national and regional level should also include special lines on the Smart-villages-approach. From the side of the EU-Regulation, two out of the five Policy Objectives for 2021-2027 are offering significant potential for Smart Villages: Priority Objective 3 (A more connected Europe – mobility and regional ICT connectivity) and Priority Objective 5 (Europe closer to citizens – sustainable and integrated development of urban, rural and coastal areas through local initiatives). PO 3 addresses the more technical aspect, PO 5 the community-based. These opportunities need to be taken up in the operational programs at national, regional and crossborder level. At this actual stage (autumn 2020) when the programs are being drafted, it is therefore important, that stakeholders interested in the topic of Smart villages contact their respective national and regional authorities. The Smart-villages-approach is not only relevant for agricultural and cohesion policy, it is as well relevant for transport, education, health, social care, tourism, energy, housing etc. All the relevant policies should therefor take the Smart-villages-approach into account and encourage it.

R3: Allocate funds to integrative approaches such as the Smart villages

Integrative approaches such the Smart-villages-approach face the common problem, that there's no dedicated funding available. Specific funding schemes should be established at all levels to allow such approaches to be developed and put into practise. Ring-fenced funds and active facilitation by skilled animators would help local actors to implement transformations. In the scope of EUSALP, the Alpine Region Preparatory Action Fund ARPAP made available by the European parliament was extremely helpful to develop cross-sectorial thematics. This type of funding schemes should urgently be perpetuated, which requires an action by the European Parliament and the Commission. An



initiative in this sense is to establish a EUSALP Innovation Facility, which could mobilize fundings from different sources, including public and private funds. On national level, Switzerland is working with “Modellvorhaben Raumentwicklung”, which translates roughly into “Models for spatial development”. Several federal offices agree on common topics and allocate common funding for them, actually e.g. for access to public services and digitalization. Another example is the “Ecologic Transition Contract” in France. Other good examples on regional level are the SCORAN and Departemental digital infrastructure schemes and/or digital use schemes in France as well as the Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030) of the Metropolitan City of Genova.

R4: Allow room for innovation and experimentation

Smart villages is a participatory approach based on local needs identified on the territory. When starting the process, the outcomes are not yet defined. Policies which support the Smart-villages-approach must therefore leave room for innovation and experimentation. They must also allow thematic openness. Good examples are e.g. the “Zukunftsraum Tirol” in Austria and the strategy for Inner Areas in Italy. The numerous programs for innovation like Horizon Europe are also very helpful to develop the Smart villages approach. But very often, these innovation policies are “territorially blind”. They lack a territorial perspective. In addition, programs like Horizon Europe are very difficult to access by “small local players”. This should be corrected in order to encourage place based approaches as Smart villages.

R5: Encourage networking and the exchange of experiences around the Smart village approach within rural and mountain areas and with urban areas

Policies should encourage networking and awareness raising of relevant stakeholders for digitalisation and foster the exchange of know how between stakeholders eg. Universities and SMEs. The ENRD network on Smart villages is very helpful at EU-level. In EUSALP, the creation of a network of Smart villages is planned for 2021. A good example at regional level is the project BodenseeMittelstand 4.0 (BoMi 4.0) in Germany, which supports SME’s in their digital transformation by bundling and coordinating the expertise from business, science and SME-related institutions and make it more accessible to regional SME’s. In the same sense, the potential of digitalization must also be used to a greater extent to improve crossborder public services. EUSALP with its multilevel-governance and transnational approach should take up this request and develop appropriate solutions.

R6: Use the potentials of the Smart villages approach to communicate the innovation potentials and attractiveness of mountain and rural areas and to link urban and rural areas

With the smart transformation under way or even accomplished, mountain and rural areas can position themselves as being at the forefront of innovation and attractive for residents and new inhabitants. The Smart-village-approach helps to develop new business models and job opportunities and with that new economic perspectives for marginalized territories. Good cooperations with the business sector are therefore important. The Smart-village-approach helps also to strengthen the resilience of rural villages, as highlighted during the Covid-19-crisis. These achievements need to be communicated in a clever way including towards newcomers and young families: Smart Villages offer new opportunities in rural mountainous areas for job creation, innovation and social inclusion and can enhance the quality of life of local communities. Strengthening the linkages between urban and rural areas is also one of the main goals of EUSALP. The EUSALP-perimeter encompasses not only the core alpine area but also the surrounding major



urban areas like Lyon, Milan, Ljubljana and Munich. Communication within EUSALP is therefore crucial. On the other side, cities should also reflect on their connections with the surrounding regions. A good example for communication at regional level is Tirol 2050 (Austria).

R7: Develop digital infrastructures and skills according to the needs and to the technological possibilities

Good digital infrastructures are a necessary precondition for Smart Villages. Policies that bring forward these infrastructures are urgently needed. Good examples are the National Ultra-Wideband Project in Italy, the Strategic Digital Program of the Liguria Region 2016-2018, the Strategy for Inner Areas in Italy with its Digital Agenda and the Public service obligation in Switzerland, which guarantees a minimum bandwidth of 10Mbit/s assured for all households and enterprises. Raising this minimum bandwidth to 80 Mbit/s is actually being discussed in the Federal Parliament. In territories with a failure of market, public investments are necessary to avoid a digital gap. Public investments in these territories must be excluded from the state aid rules. Special attention must be paid to border areas. EUSALP has identified numerous gaps in the fibre optics backbone across borders in the alpine area. These gaps must be filled by a coordinated approach of the national and regional authorities with support from macroregional and EU-level. Furthermore, the availability of digital infrastructures tends to be lower in border areas, as infrastructures are often planned and developed from a national or regional perspective. To plan and co-develop digital infrastructures in functional areas across borders should be a task encouraged by EUSALP. Basis could be the foreseen "Common Spatial development perspective", which will be elaborated in the years 2021 – 22. Digital infrastructures alone are not sufficient. Equally important are the digital skills. The potentials of digitalization can only be used, if the digital skills are well developed. Education, training and coaching are therefore crucial functions which have to be strengthened with a clear focus on rural and mountain territories.

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For more info on EUSALP: www.alpine-region.eu

For more info on the Smart villages project: <https://www.alpine-space.eu/projects/smartvillages/en/home>

