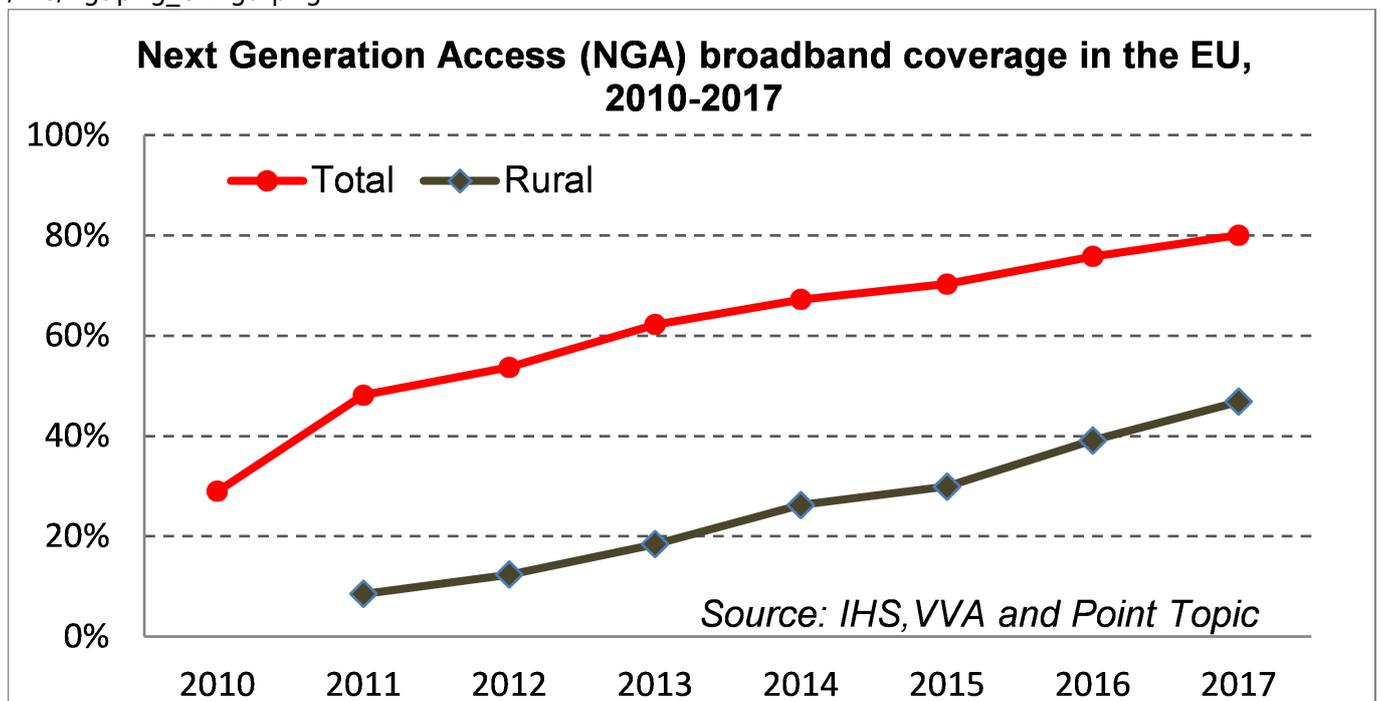# The Action Plan for Rural Broadband

Rural perspective by Jan Dröge,
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Connectivity to fast internet in rural areas is still almost half of what it is on average in the EU (47% vs 80%). Despite some progress in rural areas the gap is not narrowing, as cities progress as quickly as rural areas in improving their connectivity. Things are moving in the right direction, but if the aim is to have 100% of Europeans, including in rural areas, connected to fast internet by 2020 the roll-out must accelerate.

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The European Commission is committed to this objective and has set up a dedicated Action Plan for Rural Broadband [1].

- **Action 1:** setting up the [Broadband Competence Offices](#) [2] (BCO Network). The BCO Network will help to improve broadband connectivity in rural areas. They will provide guidance to public administrations, telecom operators, and all other public and private stakeholders interested in rolling out broadband infrastructure and services. Their aim is to gather all information related to broadband, such as funding, technology or regulatory issues, in one single point of contact within the EU countries and regions.
- **Action 2:** deployment of "broadband missions" to member states and regions with low levels of rural broadband coverage. These missions will comprise experts from across the Commission, who can provide technical assistance to unlock the administrative and financial bottlenecks to broadband roll-out.
- **Action 3:** design a "common methodology" for planning, reporting and monitoring of broadband investments.
- **Action 4**: introduction of a "rural proof test" which will prioritise rural broadband in the reprogramming of any structural and investment funds with the aim to avoid to further increase the digital gap between rural and remote areas and other areas.
- **Action 5:** update the Commission's guide to high-speed broadband investment to help local communities launch successful projects.
- **Action 6:** design a "rural broadband framework" to help implement broadband investment in rural areas.

Since January 2017, the BCO Network has been growing and expanding to include BCOs at regional level. The members of the Network contribute to making broadband planning and roll-out faster and better coordinated, particularly in those areas where private investment is failing.

Telecommunications is a liberalised sector. Indeed, in most of Europe, broadband investment is driven by private operators. Government intervention only takes place when private investment is failing. It is often the rural and remote areas that suffer the most from low private investment, due to a lack of business case for investors. Low population density; lower income or digital skills of residents; a faster ageing or diminishing population are some of the reasons which undermine the business case for rural investments. These demographic challenges are often cumulated with geographic difficulties of remoteness, such as in mountainous areas, islands or sub-arctic regions.

Need for rural services

The BCO Network has worked closely over the last year with the ENRD, notably with the [Thematic Group on Smart Villages](#) [3]. Smart Villages are not exclusively about digital services, but digital transformation can be an important element of rural development and the regeneration of rural areas. Connectivity is an essential building block for any digital rural strategy. It is not possible to have a Smart Village without broadband.

The various workshops organised by the ENRD, and specifically the [workshop on rural innovation](#) [4] organised with the OECD, have shown that stakeholders from rural areas crave a better understanding of the benefits of connectivity. Indeed, often connectivity is being discussed as a goal in its own right, whereas the competitiveness of rural areas depends on how this connectivity can be leveraged to contribute to diversification and growth.

The feedback received from these workshops was that there is clearly a need for a better understanding of the digital services that rural areas can benefit from.

The ENRD and BCO Networks are therefore working hand-in-hand to promote the benefits digital

transformation can bring.

Based on the work carried out over the previous year, the main areas of digital benefit can be categorised as follows:

- smart agriculture;
- e-commerce for local SMEs;
- social services, such as health and elderly care;
- community services, such as shared transport solutions;
- e-government services; and
- communications / access, both private and business.

In many cases, digitisation allows services that have been divested away from rural communities to be offered again, through a different medium. In some cases, these services are offered by public administrations, while in others, technology allows social innovation to take over where public services have been discontinued or have failed.

The communication aspect is key, in that it allows citizens and businesses to live in remote areas while fully partaking in the global economy.

The ENRD has built a [reference library of good practices](#) [5] around such initiatives. The library is growing every day. The BCO Network is actively promoting this reference work, so that infrastructure planners have the needs of rural communities in mind as they develop investment projects.

A workshop in April 2018 has shown that close to 80% of BCOs are unaware of the work of the National Rural Networks (NRNs) in their country. Indeed, most BCOs are hosted either in their country's National Regulatory Authority or Ministry in charge of telecommunications. Rural development may not have been historically a main concern for these administrations. By bringing the public investment promoters and the rural stakeholders together, the BCO Network and the ENRD contribute to better broadband planning.

Next steps

The activities described above are mainly focused around the Action 1 of the Plan for Rural Broadband – growing and strengthening the BCO Network. The close cooperation between ENRD and BCO has allowed bringing the realities of rural areas closer to the BCO Network members.

The Commission is currently working on accelerating other points of the Action Plan. An expert panel is being selected to work on Action 6, the "rural broadband framework".

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Links
[1] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/european-commission-joins-forces-help-bringing-more-broadband-rural-areas
[2] https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/broadband-competence-offices
[3] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/enrd-thematic-work/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages_en
[4] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/news-events/events/11th-oecd-rural-development-conference-enabling-rural-innovation_en
[5] https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en