



TARGETING LOCAL INITIATIVES

The trigger for revitalising village services often comes from a collective response by the community to a cut or deterioration in the service, which in turn leads to a willingness to invest time and resources to find new solutions. But emerging grassroots initiatives often face a complex policy environment characterised by legislative barriers, absence of accessible funding and the over-reliance on volunteers. In this context, rural communities need support in identifying the fields where they have most chance of success.

This briefing provides references to a selection of planning tools to help practitioners, local decision-makers, and community groups to design and develop sustainable rural services. Even though the focus is clearly set on rural services, each tool can equally fit other types of intervention.

The ENRD Contact Point has set up a dedicated Thematic Group (TG) to identify ways of revitalising rural services through digital and social innovation. This document is based on TG members' contributions.

DESIGNING 'CITIZEN-DRIVEN' RURAL SERVICES

The impetus for designing a Smart Village can come directly from grassroots collective action or indirectly from external planning or research initiatives. In all cases, however, certain principles need to be taken into account in order to keep people at the centre of the process.

When planning territorial and community actions, it is useful to think of the process as cyclical or circular learning. The cyclical planning model developed under the [URBACT II Local Support Toolkit](#)⁽¹⁾ is a representation of a process that does not start or end (see figure). Such a cycle brings together all aspects of planning into a coherent, unified process, helping to ensure that the plan is well-focused, resilient, practical and cost-effective. It can also help to ensure that learning from mistakes feeds back into future planning and decision-making⁽²⁾. Local people are a central part of all phases.

Figure. A cyclical planning model



Source: URBACT II Local Support Toolkit, adaptation of planning model

1 The model identifies key factors that provide a framework for any good project: relevant stakeholders to be engaged, definition of problems, review of evidence, definition of actions, responsibilities, timeline, funding, etc. The model has been slightly adapted here.

2 Source: http://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/urbact_toolkit_online_4_0.pdf (see pp.62-63).

Tips on the planning processes

💡 STARTING WITH STAKEHOLDER NEEDS

Collaborative stakeholder approaches to shaping decisions and designing smart services can use different techniques: from simple information exchange to multi-stakeholder exercises, stakeholder analysis involving conflict resolution and impact assessment. Recently, LEADER groups used methods like 'Theory U'⁽³⁾ to engage in 'deep' unprejudiced listening and uncover hidden voices and 'wild ideas'.

💡 BUILDING A SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Developing a shared understanding of needs and opportunities is usually a preliminary step. There are numerous techniques from participative SWOT analyses and problem trees to distinguish the symptoms from root causes. A rich picture – or visual mapping exercise – helps to open discussion and build ownership.

Techniques like 'Planning for real', which use scale models, drawings and, increasingly, digital tools can also assist. A citizens' walk or field visit with all stakeholders who have – or should have – an interest in shaping the decision for new rural services can be a very simple exercise to propose, bringing together all parties.

💡 FROM VISION TO SUSTAINABLE ACTION

Setting goals and jointly deciding on realistic priorities is one of the hardest and potentially conflicting phases. Scenario building and 'innovation camps' can help to build a future-proof vision and tease out new ideas – but this needs to be compared realistically with the human and financial resources that are accessible to the community.

This is where cooperation and exchanges with other areas and outside actors can open up new ways of doing things. Translating the vision into sustainable action is the stage where communities often require specific tailor-made technical, financial and business planning support.

💡 THE GOVERNANCE OF CHANGE

Finally, an effective and participative governance structure is essential. The setting up of a representative steering group can be a way to make sure all voices are being heard from the outset. It can be a small group that makes strategic decisions and gives strategic advice.

Eventually, some form of partnership with a balanced representation of the different parties concerned (public and private), a mixture of people with hands-on experience and those who are in a position to bring about institutional change is also an asset⁽⁴⁾.



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3 A free online course is available at: <https://www.edx.org/course/u-lab-leading-emerging-future-mitx-15-671-1x-0>

4 For additional information, see 'Forming a steering group: what makes a good group', Social Enterprises Solutions, 2011: http://www.socialenterprisesolutions.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/21_steering_group.pdf

DIAGNOSTIC TOOLS

Beyond the conventional project management methods that can be used to identify the ‘what’ and ‘how’ in the early phase of designing a Smart Village initiative, several approaches (presented below) specifically apply to local communities – understood as a pool of private and public stakeholders. These can be easily applicable to a rural area willing to reinvent its village services.

Examples of diagnostic tools for territorial and community planning

TESS Resilience Compass	eTownz – A common online platform
<p>The Resilience Compass is a self-assessment tool for both policy-makers and community activists. It introduces four dimensions (people, economy, links and culture) and three states of resilience (breakdown, breakeven and breakthrough). Using the Resilience Compass, community-led initiatives can reflect on the current state of their project and target actions for the future.</p> <p>The tool was developed by TESS (Towards European Societal Sustainability), a European research project exploring the role of community-led initiatives in creating a sustainable and low-carbon Europe.</p>	<p>eTownz is an IT company based in Dublin, Ireland, providing online tools and offline workshops to support community planning and development. Packages of service are customised to the particular needs of the communities in order to bring residents, businesses, public services and clubs together in one digital place, sharing information throughout the entire community.</p> <p>The aim is to have a community-development tool in order to: efficiently manage projects, tasks and volunteers; better socialise and share ideas; and access key information/data through an online library.</p>
Measuring Social and Economic Return on Investment (SEROI+)	The Living Lab approach
<p>The Interreg Europe project ERUDITE takes a multi-stakeholder approach to ensure all key stakeholders are involved in the conceptualisation, design and delivery of new digital services that contribute to the development of smarter rural territories and smarter citizens.</p> <p>The SEROI+ process uses open social and economic innovation to identify, design and value services prioritised by local stakeholders and policy interventions. Stakeholders are engaged in a practical and interactive ‘open’ territorial design process where services are prioritised and their impact assessed through the social, economic and environmental return on investment.</p> <p>A simple, practical value-led roadmap is proposed for selected service areas with four steps to create the building blocks for rural smart environments and communities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define policy or practice goals for the services; • Identify and engage stakeholders; • Co-design the service; • Set indicators and values, estimate and then monitor return on investment. 	<p>To implement the Digital Villages project in Germany, the ‘Living Lab’ approach was used. This methodology is based on the work of existing living labs. The emphasis is put on: (i) 3 cycles: concept, prototype, final solution; (ii) 3 phases: appreciate, design, evaluate; and (iii) 3 focuses: users, business, technology.</p> <p>During the initial phase, concepts and practical solutions were discussed with residents in the presence of specialists and other stakeholders interested in the project (the ‘users’ group’). A selection of solutions is chosen for prototyping and testing with the users’ group until concrete solutions are digitised, mostly in the form of mobile apps or online services.</p> <p>Key target domains for digital services are local products and services such as voluntary work and communication.</p> <p>The local residents’ capacity to engage into the design of the application or service is the optimal way to showcase the new service. It also brings the local population closer to its administration.</p>

COMBINING BOTTOM-UP AND TOP-DOWN APPROACHES

There is a growing recognition that bottom-up processes on their own are not sufficient for dealing with many global rural challenges. At the same time, both the public and private sectors need the 'gold in people's mind' to prosper in a rapidly changing world. This creates the opportunity for more creative 'win-win' mixtures of bottom-up and top-down processes for Smart Villages.

Evidence gathered by the ENRD Thematic Group so far reveals that many Smart Villages are mixing grassroots or bottom-up resources and skills with top-down policies that fit their needs. In other words, Smart Village strategies can combine innovative policies implemented top-down by national or regional authorities with the energy and knowledge of local communities.

For example, grassroots village initiatives such as the [Scottish Community Development Trusts](#) benefit from the favourable environment created by the Scottish government. On the other hand, the initiative to create [multi-service hubs in Flanders](#) came from the association of municipalities and the [Digital Villages in Germany](#) – from a research institute.

In both cases, local people play a central role. The fusion of bottom-up and top-down approaches is also reflected in the place-based approach applied in the [Inner Areas Strategy in Italy](#).

LEADER Local Action Groups (LAGs) can be key intermediate actors with capacities to mobilise and animate local communities and link the local with the more top-down ambitions and needs.

Examples of tools combining top-down and bottom-up elements

Digital Diagnosis

Designing and adopting a smart strategy relies upon knowledge and data that needs to be collected from a wide variety of sectors, then analysed and discussed by the relevant stakeholders, including end-users. The Pays de Verdun, France, carried out a [digital diagnosis](#) (in French: diagnostic numérique) with LEADER support.

It is not just another study, but a dynamic process that helps to formulate challenges and opportunities for emerging digital initiatives (including the silver economy), to map existing activities (i.e. health, education, training, mobility, employment, tourism, etc.), to build consensus on the main priorities and to agree upon an action plan.



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Communal Audit in Austria

[CommunalAudit](#) is a tool that gives Austrian rural municipalities the opportunity to objectively and systematically compare their finances, management procedures, as well as their service infrastructure projects with other municipalities. Dedicated professional support is provided by a private consultancy.

One basic module provides an analysis of state of play and benchmarks it with other municipalities. An optional module is available for the development of tailor-made strategies. Many local authorities in rural Austria get EAFRD support (under Measure 7.1 on 'Village renewal') to fund this audit service and to develop their smart strategies.



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