

INNOVATION – SHAPING THE FUTURE

Extending digital opportunities for rural businesses and communities

BACKGROUND

The workshop had a strong focus on how to seize digital opportunities in the wider rural context, once appropriate broadband connectivity is in place. It emphasised that digitisation is a tool not an end in itself. Digitisation can offer new opportunities not only in the agricultural sector (e.g. precision farming) but also in the wider rural economy (including social services, non-agricultural businesses, etc.). Rural digital hubs are useful 'tools' that can contribute to improved use of digital technology in rural communities.



PRESENTATIONS

Rural Hubs- Extending digital opportunities for rural businesses and communities, Clive Peckham

The presentation introduced the tool of rural digital hubs and the way they contribute to seizing digital opportunities for the community, businesses and the whole rural territory. For instance, the Cocotte-Murat Rural Digital Hub has been developed through several stages from a simple co-working / internet-access space to a multi-functional hub for the local community with an international reach. It brought economic (jobs, productivity), social (inward migration, public services) as well as environmental (reducing travel distance to work) benefits for the region. Overall, rural digital hubs contribute to better connectivity, inclusion, accessibility and collaboration.



Experience of the Slovenian Fab-Lab Network, Emilija Stojmenova

In Slovenia a Fab-Lab Network has been set up. It started by mapping the various fablabs across the country, their capacity and the specific regions where these are located. Among others, the network allows various initiatives and entrepreneurs working in the same field to connect with each other and develop new products jointly even from a distance. For instance three distantly located entrepreneurs in wood works have created a joint product (highchair for toddlers and kids with digital functions) by cooperating through the fablab network.



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MAIN OUTCOMES FROM THE DISCUSSIONS

Participants discussed two specific questions in small groups:

- What are the **main challenges and needs** that you can address through digitisation in rural areas?
- How **policies and support tools can be developed** to improve the situation in rural areas through digitisation?



Challenges

- **Lack of dedicated funding** for digitisation: difficult for potential beneficiaries to know 'where to go for money'. Government departments often work in silos. Rural development ministries are not necessarily best placed to set the policy for digitisation.
- Funding instruments are often **too prescriptive** and do not allow flexibility to shape and adjust policy directions over time.
- **Lack of capacity, knowledge and skills** on how to best seize digitisation opportunities. Cooperation and knowledge-sharing among relevant stakeholders is often not easy (e.g. transnational cooperation within LEADER is challenging). Need for accessing good practice, information and training on funding, financial planning, setting up and operation of digital hubs.

"Projectification" means thinking too much in terms of individual projects, without seeing the bigger picture.

Recommendations

- **Funding rules should be more flexible**, avoiding prescriptive approaches and allow changes over time. The same definitions may not apply everywhere, however, useful models are needed. Better integration of digitisation policies and the harmonisation and coordination of rules across different funding streams are important.
- **Digitisation needs to be part of a wider strategy** (the 'bigger picture'). Building digitisation strategies can start from identifying local needs and developing local digitisation strategies. These should then be built into larger (national and EU-level digitisation) strategies.
- **Digitisation has wider socio-economic potential**, e.g. in the context of provision of social services. The hardest-to-reach areas need to be better targeted.
- **Capacity-building** and the development of skills is crucial at the local level: Exchange of experience, sharing of existing outcomes, peer-to-peer ("healthy envy"), cooperation (including LEADER) are tools that contribute to the learning process.
- **Facilitation and mediation roles ('enablers')** at the local level for understanding the potential and opportunities of digitisation and for developing local hubs. This function should be part of the job description of local hub leaders/ initiators. Technical skills also need to be improved starting from education in schools.
- **Private sector contributions** (energy & drive) need to be drawn in. Setting 'conditionalities' for private investments (i.e. making it a condition of investments also to contribute to digitisation facilities) is an option to be considered.

"Access to existing networks and ecosystems is important: knowing what is out there, accessing to skills and knowledge to complement those locally available."

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