

RURAL PACT

Mapping the implementation of Smart Villages based on consultations with selected Smart Village stakeholders

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1. Executive summary

Smart Villages are emerging across Europe through a wide variety of governance and delivery models. While implementation differs considerably across Member States, the evidence gathered in this study consistently indicates that Smart Villages should be understood less as a specific funding instrument than as a community-led, strategic development process. Their added value lies in enabling rural communities to develop a shared long-term vision, mobilise local actors and coordinate integrated responses to local challenges, rather than in supporting individual projects in isolation.

Member States have adopted diverse implementation approaches. Some support Smart Villages through dedicated CAP interventions such as cooperation or investments, while others rely exclusively on LEADER. The findings of this study do not point to a single preferred implementation model. Instead, they show that different governance and funding arrangements can successfully support Smart Villages, provided they preserve their defining characteristics as place-based, participatory and community-led processes.

A key challenge remains translating the concept into practice. A working definition was proposed by the Pilot project on Smart eco-social villages.

Working definition of Smart Villages (Pilot project on Smart eco-social villages)

Smart Villages are communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities. They rely on a participatory approach to develop and implement their strategy to improve their economic, social and/or environmental conditions, in particular by mobilising solutions offered by digital technologies. Smart Villages benefit from cooperation and alliances with other communities and actors in rural and urban areas. The initiation and the implementation of Smart Village strategies may build on existing initiatives and can be funded by a variety of public and private sources.

While the definition has been widely reflected in CAP Strategic Plans, important differences remain in how Smart Villages are interpreted and implemented. The evidence confirms three defining features:

- 'smart' does not equal 'digital', and innovation means new types of solutions producing systemic change with a strong social-innovation dimension;
- the smart village strategy is the principal feature distinguishing the approach from project-by-project support; and
- the target beneficiary is the local rural community.

Support frameworks analysed in the study are aligned with these characteristics, focusing on strategies developed by individual rural communities or groups of neighbouring communities. These cover territories ranging from a single village to a micro-region where a suitable coordinating body, such as a LEADER LAG, exists.

Across all implementation models, several factors consistently emerge as critical for successful implementation. The preparation of Smart Village initiatives is one of the strongest determinants of their quality. This extends well beyond financial support, requiring adequate time, facilitation, advisory services, coaching and peer learning to enable communities to build partnerships, develop a shared vision and prepare high-quality strategies.

Dedicated funding for the preparation phase is a good practice in the examined Member States. Sustained community facilitation – through LAGs and other intermediary organisations (e.g. Tussenheid Hilvarenbeek which operates as a non-profit local foundation – see Case Study No 4) – is equally necessary

for strengthening local ownership, trust, leadership and strategic capacity. However, this facilitation is a distinct and resource-intensive task that is not always matched by dedicated financial and human resources within existing implementation arrangements, particularly where it is delivered by LEADER LAGs.

A credible pathway from strategy development to implementation is equally important. Communities are more willing to invest in participatory planning when realistic implementation opportunities exist. Good practice therefore combines strategy preparation with funding for initial implementation, through a lump sum or dedicated budget covering both the participatory strategy process and a first portfolio of priority actions. Alternatively, it provides clear incentives linking approved strategies to subsequent funding opportunities, through additional selection points, higher aid intensity, reserved budgets or preferential access to other schemes.

The study further identifies several implementation challenges. These include differing interpretations of the Smart Villages concept, uncertainty over the distinction between smart village strategies and individual projects, uneven community capacity to drive Smart Village processes, limited financial and administrative resources, and the resource-intensive nature of facilitation. Where Smart Villages are implemented through LEADER, the added value is most evident when LAGs support integrated community strategies rather than individual projects through standard LEADER delivery mechanisms.

Governance arrangements are also critical. Smart Villages reflect the principle of subsidiarity by locating responsibility at the lowest level capable of acting effectively, supported through appropriate multi-level governance arrangements that enable local action. While no single governance scale is optimal, the evidence suggests that implementation should remain close to local communities, with regional authorities providing coordination, funding, acting with a focus on local community needs and enabling support.

Overall, the evidence suggests that the future development of Smart Villages depends less on establishing a single implementation model than on strengthening the enabling conditions that underpin successful delivery. These include a clearer operational understanding of the concept, sustained investment in preparation and facilitation, support for integrated community strategies, appropriate governance arrangements, and implementation pathways that translate community-led planning into tangible local action.

2. Introduction

2.1. Background: Smart Rural 27 and the implementation of Smart Villages under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

The Second Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century (the Smart Rural 27 project, 2021-2024) developed a study entitled '**Support for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans**'[1]. It analysed how Smart Villages were designed and programmed across the 28 CAP Strategic Plans (CSPs)[2] of the Member States and regions (in the case of the two CSPs of Belgium). The analysis was carried out on the basis of CSPs as approved in 2022, and some refinements that occurred throughout the Smart Rural 27 project duration.

The Smart Rural 27 work established two broad approaches adopted by Member States to support Smart Villages. A first group **programmed dedicated (direct) Smart Villages interventions in their CSPs**. These include Smart Village cooperation interventions (Article 77 of the CAP Regulation) in Finland, Hungary[3], Italy,

[1] Source: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/42e8691b-d93b-11ef-be2a-01aa75ed71a1

[2] Regulation (EU) 2021/2115 establishing rules on support for strategic plans to be drawn up by Member States under the common agricultural policy (CAP Strategic Plans)

[3] NB: Hungary switched from implementing Smart Villages through a dedicated intervention to LEADER intervention.

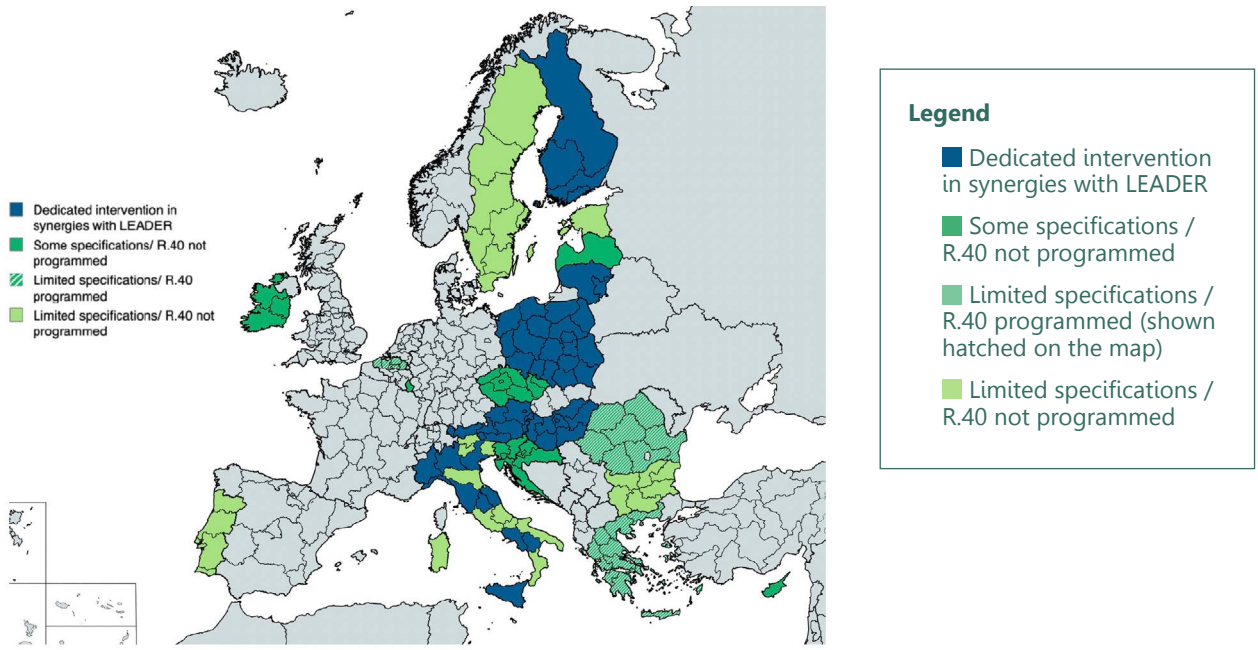
Lithuania, and Austria, as well as investment interventions (Article 73 of the CAP Regulation) in Austria, Poland and Galicia (Spain); a second, larger group (Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden) chose to **support Smart Villages exclusively through LEADER,** without establishing any dedicated intervention. For this group, the information available at the time of the analysis was limited. The CSPs generally contained only broad provisions on how Smart Villages would be implemented through LEADER, and in many cases the result indicator R.40 – Smart transition of the rural economy: Number of supported smart village strategies – was not programmed.

The map below provides an overview of the resulting support framework across Member States and regions developed under the Smart Rural 27 project, and the table presents the Member States that had included specific target values for R.40 at the time. It distinguishes those supporting Smart Villages exclusively through LEADER from those combining LEADER with dedicated Smart Village interventions. This information provided the basis for designing the methodology of the present study, including the selection of stakeholders and case studies.

Table 1: R.40 programming in CAP SPs (Smart Rural 27 Study, 2024)

CAP SP	Planned value
Austria	54
Finland	60
Hungary	52
Italy	404
Lithuania	25
Poland	18
Spain	16

Figure 1: Smart Village support in Member States according to the Smart Rural 27 analysis



Source: Smart Rural 27 project, Support for Smart Villages in the CAP Strategic Plans, Synthesis Report (2024), E40 Analysis. Source: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/42e8691b-d93b-11ef-be2a-01aa75ed71a1

2.2. Purpose of the study

This study, carried out from April to September 2026, was designed to capture early lessons from the implementation of Smart Village interventions under a number of CSPs, and identify good practices and implementation bottlenecks, building on the outcomes and information available so far. It also aimed to generate practical insights to support peer learning among Member States and inform the work of the Smart Villages Community Group of the Rural Pact to reflect on the post-2027 policy framework.

The work was guided by four specific objectives:

1. gather qualitative evidence and feedback from rural stakeholders directly involved in planning and implementing Smart Villages, with particular attention to the main principles underpinning the concept: community participation, the preparation of an action plan or strategy, and the supporting role of LEADER LAGs;
2. identify the key implementation challenges encountered in practice, alongside the factors contributing to successful delivery of Smart Villages;
3. identify and document transferable good practices;
4. assemble evidence base grounded in practitioners' experience, which could support both Member States still designing their instruments and those already delivering them (cross-cutting objective).

2.3. Methodology

The study was carried out in four stages: (i) scoping and preparation; (ii) stakeholder identification and outreach; (iii) interviews and data collection; and (iv) analysis and synthesis.

2.3.1. Scoping and preparation

The first stage identified the Member States and interventions to be covered and defined the interview framework. In consultation with the European Commission's DG AGRI, two complementary data collection instruments were developed: a semi-structured interview guide for managing authorities and beneficiaries; and a short questionnaire for managing authorities delivering Smart Villages exclusively through LEADER. Together, these instruments were designed to provide a coherent evidence base by combining qualitative interview findings with information collected through the questionnaire.

2.3.2. Stakeholder identification and outreach

Three categories of stakeholder were targeted and interviewed (see below). The first comprised managing authority representatives in Member States with Smart Village interventions, whether implemented through a dedicated intervention or delivered under LEADER. The second comprised beneficiaries or intermediaries (namely LAGs) of Smart Village interventions. The third comprised local stakeholders capable of implementing smart village projects or strategies, but who were not currently receiving CAP support.

2.3.3. Interviews and data collection

Managing authorities with direct interventions. Semi-structured online interviews were conducted with managing authorities in Member States that programmed Smart Villages as a direct intervention in their CSPs. Interviews were completed with representatives from Finland, Italy, Lithuania and Hungary. Poland provided written answers following the same interview guide rather than participating in an online interview. Austria declined to participate in the interview process. Galicia (Spain) did not respond to the interview request.

In Austria, an additional effort was made to gather evidence by inviting beneficiaries of the first round of approved Smart Village projects (based on a list provided by the managing authority) to complete the questionnaire. One response was received to date. Consequently, Austrian evidence was reflected in the analysis mostly through the beneficiary interview – and Case Study No 1 described below.

Managing authorities delivering Smart Villages through LEADER. Complementary evidence was collected through a short questionnaire sent to managing authorities that programmed Smart Village support exclusively through LEADER. Nine of the thirteen managing authorities contacted responded – Sweden, Latvia, Estonia, Belgium-Flanders, Slovenia, Croatia, Czechia, Greece and Bulgaria. No responses were received from Ireland, Cyprus, Portugal and Luxembourg.

In addition, all managing authorities were offered the opportunity to participate in an interview. The managing authority of Belgium (Flanders) accepted the invitation, and a supplementary interview was conducted.

Beneficiary and local stakeholder interviews. Interviews were also carried out with beneficiaries of Smart Village interventions and representatives of LAGs across six Member States (Finland, Austria, the Netherlands, Italy, Hungary and Poland). These included both communities receiving CAP support and local initiatives actively implementing Smart Village approaches without CAP funding.

Table 2: List of beneficiary and potential beneficiary interviews

No.	Village / LAG	Focus	CAP intervention	Country
	Smart Villages CAP intervention beneficiaries			
1	Kuhmo	IT / Digitalisation	Preparatory grant of EUR 5 000 lump sum (Elävä Kainuu LEADER)	FI
2	Stanz im Mürztal*	Energy community	Local Innovation Partnership (LIP) under intervention 77-03	AT
3	Hilvarenbeek**	Capacity building / animation	First LEADER funding (Kempenland LEADER), then national	NL
4	Lappeenranta	Security (regional scope)	ELY route (now the Eastern Finland Vitality Centre)	FI
5	LAG Escartons e Valli Valdesi	Smart village strategy support	LEADER (SRG06) – LAG EVV & activated SRG07	IT
	Potential beneficiaries / interested communities (not receiving CAP support)			
6	Gaiba**	Village in Veneto region	Not applicable	IT
7	Olaszfa**	Village in Western Hungary	Not applicable	HU
8	Tomaszyn*	Regenerative agriculture cooperative	Not applicable	PL

* Selected Smart Rural 21 communities, ** Active participants ('come along villages') in Smart Rural projects.

2.3.4. Analysis and synthesis

The final stage consisted of a qualitative analysis of interview findings and questionnaire responses. The evidence was synthesised to identify the main implementation challenges and bottlenecks, factors contributing to successful implementation, and transferable good practices, forming the basis for the study's conclusions and lessons.

2.3.5. Case studies

In addition to the interviews, five case studies were selected to illustrate distinct support models and different thematic entry points into the Smart Village concept:

- Case Study No 1: Stanz im Mürztal (Austria) – an energy community;
- Case Study No 2: Kuhmo (Finland) – use of the preparatory fund, with a focus on IT and digitalisation;
- Case Study No 3: Lappeenranta (Finland) – a regional Smart Village project addressing security and preparedness;

- Case Study No 4: Hilvarenbeek (the Netherlands) – long-term experimentation with the Smart Village approach;
- Case Study No 5: LAG Escartons e Valli Valdesi (Italy) – an innovative approach to supporting Smart Villages across a LAG territory.

2.4. Limitations

Three limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, coverage of managing authorities implementing dedicated direct interventions was incomplete: Austria did not wish to participate in interviews, Galicia (Spain) did not respond to the invitation to participate, and Poland provided written responses instead of participating in an interview.

Second, although the questionnaire achieved good coverage among managing authorities supporting Smart Villages exclusively through LEADER, no responses were received from Cyprus, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal. In addition, the level of detail in the responses varied. Several respondents had not yet published their calls and were therefore unable to provide information on applications or implementation.

Finally, the number of beneficiary interviews was necessarily limited. As a result, the evidence gathered from practitioners should be regarded as illustrative rather than representative and interpreted alongside the broader evidence collected from managing authorities.

3. Overall state of play of Smart Village implementation in the 2023-2027 programming period

3.1. What has changed since the initial approval of CSPs?

Four of the five respondent Member States (Finland, Italy, Lithuania and Poland) have reported **no substantive changes** to how Smart Villages have been programmed since the approval of their CSP. Hungary was the only country to introduce a significant structural change, transferring Smart Villages from a standalone direct intervention to implementation through LEADER.

According to the Hungarian managing authority, this decision was driven by a strong and unexpected bottom-up demand. More than 30 out of 105 Local Development Strategies (LDSs) submitted in December 2023 included Smart Villages, with several LAGs already having mapped settlement-level needs and started co-developing Smart Village strategies with villages. Delivering Smart Villages through LEADER was therefore considered the most effective delivery mechanism.

Most Member States reported using the working definition of Smart Villages. However, as presented later in this report, there is still no common understanding of how the concept should be implemented, particularly regarding its core components and the meaning of both 'smart' and 'smart village strategy'.

Regarding 'smartness', while Member States no longer place strong emphasis on digital aspects as in the early stages of the concept, defining what makes an initiative 'smart' remains an ongoing challenge. For instance, in Hungary, although the interviewees from the former Ministry of Agriculture stressed that 'smart' should not be equated solely with 'digital', digital aspects still feature prominently in the draft call description developed by the managing authority. Italy reported that digitalisation is not a central aspect of regional calls. Lithuania treats digitalisation as one selection criterion among several rather than as the defining characteristic of Smart Villages, while Finland noted that although digitalisation dominated the initial implementation phase, the focus has since broadened considerably.

3.2. Overview of Member State approaches

3.2.1. Member States that support Smart Villages through dedicated interventions

The Member States with dedicated interventions to support Smart Villages have adopted different models of implementation, as shown in Figure 2 below. These can be distinguished according to three main dimensions:

i. The entity ('intermediary body') managing the Smart Village process and calls. This is indicated in brackets after the country name in Figure 2. Depending on the model, the process may be managed by:

a. LEADER LAGs which play a role in all respondent countries with dedicated interventions (either as managing the calls or as direct applicants);

b. Regional-level entities such as ELY / economic development centres in Finland or the Italian regional model (see more information on the delivery model in Italy below).

ii. The territorial scope of required smart village strategies. This is represented on the vertical axis of the figure below and refers to the level at which smart village strategies are defined and required. The approaches range from:

a. Models in which neither project plans nor strategies are required, as in the Italian regional approach;

b. Models in which the smart village strategy takes the form of targeted (cooperation) project plans (e.g. as in Finland);

c. Models in which smart village strategies are developed at village / settlement or multiple settlements (village cooperation) levels (as in Hungary, Poland, the Escartons LAG in Italy[4]);

d. Models in which smart village strategies are defined at a higher territorial level than a village / settlement or multiple settlements (e.g. smaller areas within the LEADER area / district-level in Lithuania).

iii. The targeted beneficiary of the Smart Village intervention. This is represented on the horizontal axis of the figure. The intervention may target:

a. Individual project beneficiaries located within villages (e.g. as in the Finnish LEADER model);

b. Individual villages / settlements (e.g. as in Poland);

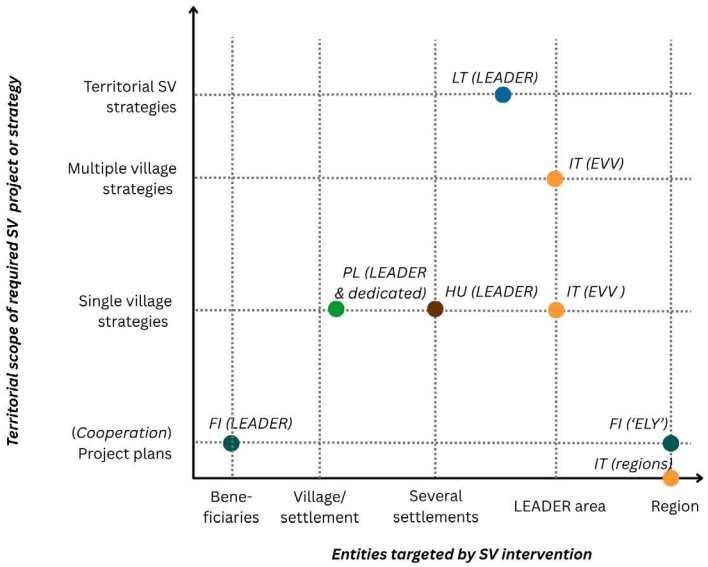
c. Cooperation between villages / settlements targeted (e.g. as in Hungary);

d. Smaller areas within the LEADER area level (e.g. larger districts within the LEADER area in Lithuania) or LEADER area (as in the case of the Escartons LAG in Italy);

e. Regional level, as in the Finnish Economic Development (former ELY) Centre and Italian regional models.

[4] EVV is one of the most advanced LAGs in Smart Village implementation and used as one example of the LEADER approach in Italy – although one that cannot be generalised for the whole country.

Figure 2: Overview of Member State approaches to the implementation of Smart Villages through dedicated interventions



Further details on the delivery models identified in each Member State are provided below.

Delivery in Finland

Finland delivers Smart Villages through complementary implementation channels. Rather than requiring formal smart village strategies, it supports cooperation projects based on project plans:

1. Economic Development (former ELY) Centres for larger regional umbrella projects (with a regional scope);

2. LEADER LAGs for smaller local projects, typically beneficiaries within single municipalities or villages, capped at EUR 200 000. Projects require a **partnership of at least two** – but preferably more – **local partners** (primarily non-profit associations, educational actors, or community-type organisations);

3. **Preparatory grants** of EUR 5 000 enabling applicants to build partnerships and prepare high-quality cooperation projects before submitting a full funding application.

Delivery in Italy

Italy delivers Smart Villages through intervention for cooperation SRG07 ('Cooperation for Local Rural Development and Smart Villages'). The intervention does not formally require the preparation of smart village strategies. Smart Villages can be implemented in two complementary ways:

- **Regional projects** require at least two beneficiaries, one of whom must be designated as the lead beneficiary (administratively responsible). Ten out of 21 regions activated the SRG07 intervention. Those projects have a thematic focus (such as food systems, supply chains or environmental cooperation) and funding typically ranges from EUR 300 000-400 000 up to EUR 10 million.

- **LEADER LAGs** can also activate SRG07[5] and implement Smart Villages within the LEADER intervention (SRG06) with no additional funding for Smart Villages beyond that allocated to LEADER. Their approach varies as it depends on the individual LAG. In several regions, LAGs were also able to design their own

[5] Based on EVV LAG interview/ practice in Piedmont region in Italy: In Italy's CAP Strategic Plan, SRG07 (smart villages) is a separate intervention code that LAGs can choose to include in their LEADER (SRG06) local development strategy. When they do, SRG07 is nested within SRG06 and financed entirely from the LAG's existing LEADER budget. This is distinct from, and unconnected to, the regional SRG07 thematic cooperation projects that some regions implement directly.

specific Smart Village-like actions (azioni specifiche) from scratch, such as community-led projects, rather than relying solely on the standard actions set out in the regional programming. Some of the most advanced LAGs – such as Escartons (EVV) interviewed for this study (see Case Study No 5) – support and require villages within their LEADER area to develop smart village strategies either individually or in cooperation with other villages. While an in-depth comparative analysis of LAG approaches is not covered by this study, it is expected that EVV's Smart Village approach will be one of the most advanced ones.

Delivery in Lithuania

Lithuania delivers Smart Villages through **LEADER LAGs or cooperation of LAGs** acting as umbrella project coordinators involving other local partners in the covered areas (typically municipal administrations and public institutions, non-governmental organisations and SMEs). These partners implement constituent projects defined under the smart village strategy, while the LAG acts as coordinator and umbrella beneficiary.

The **smart village strategy** is submitted as part of the Smart Village funding application, together with the proposed projects integrated as part of the strategy. The strategy typically covers a **wider region rather than a single settlement** such as elderships or districts within the LAG territory, or areas spanning multiple LAGs (if more than one LAG is involved as partner). Smart village strategies in Lithuania are expected to **collectively address a single challenge or thematic area** (such as sustainable rural development, economic development and entrepreneurship, social inclusion and quality of life, environment and sustainability, digitalisation and innovation, or local infrastructure and services),[6] and their budgets are capped at EUR 500 000 / EUR 600 000 / EUR 700 000, depending on whether implemented by one LAG, or through the cooperation of two or three LAGs.

Delivery in Poland

In Poland, LEADER LAGs (under I.13.1 LEADER) can choose to include the preparation of **Smart Village concepts (simplified strategies)** in their Local Development Strategies in the form of grant projects. LAGs grant at least PLN 20 000 (c. EUR 4 600) for the development of a **minimum of five local community concepts**, each covering a population of no more than 20 000 inhabitants.

By 2 July 2026, 44 calls for Smart Village concepts had been launched across nine voivodeships. The implementation of the concepts is supported through LEADER and other funding interventions, in particular through the dedicated **Smart Village infrastructure measure I.10.10.B** which supports local municipal infrastructure investments. Delivery of this latter intervention is regionalised via the voivodeship self-governments. The direct calls under the intervention I.10.10.B are not expected before September 2026.

Delivery in Hungary

Hungary is the only Member State to have restructured its Smart Village programming in 2025. Originally (in 2022), it included a dedicated CSP intervention with its own calls; it is now planned under LEADER. However, the initial intervention's key characteristics have been retained. It aims to support cooperation initiatives of 2 to 10 settlements, each receiving support for the development of a smart village strategy (with a target to support more than 50 smart village strategies), followed by support for the implementation of joint actions.

The intervention's budget of HUF 1.6 billion (approximately EUR 4.5 million), equivalent to an average of around EUR 84 000 per settlement, has been transferred to LEADER LAGs, thus increasing the overall LEADER budget. The Smart Village call will be published as a separate, centrally managed cooperation call in those LAGs that have included, or will include, Smart Villages in their LDSs.

[6] Smart village strategies have to focus on a single thematic area since the launch of the third call. Prior to this, smart village strategies could focus on two thematic areas.

Key findings

Beneficiaries of Smart Village interventions: Since dedicated interventions are mostly cooperation interventions (Article 77), partnership-based application is the dominant eligibility principle: collective applications are required in every model except Poland's investment strand, which runs under the investment intervention (Article 73).

LAGs are the central coordinating entity, acting as lead beneficiary in the Lithuanian and Hungarian umbrella models. Countries differ mainly in where municipalities are part of the partnership, for instance, they are a mandatory consortium member in Hungary, a partner when thematically relevant in Finland and Italy, and in Poland, they are the designated beneficiary of investment funding while local communities prepare the Smart Village concepts through LEADER.

Eligibility and selection criteria: Despite the differences in implementation models, eligibility and selection criteria are remarkably consistent across countries and largely reflect established LEADER principles rather than requirements specific to Smart Villages. Interview evidence identifies innovation and 'smartness' as the hardest criteria to define and operationalise, while strategic coherence is explicitly assessed only in Lithuania and by the Italian Escartons (EVV) LAG.

Digitalisation is not a prerequisite in any Member State – where present, it is one element within broader criteria. The criteria that could most clearly distinguish Smart Villages – smartness/innovation and strategic scope – remain unclear and challenging to be consistently applied.

3.2.2. Member States that support Smart Villages through LEADER

At the time of CSPs' approvals and the Smart Rural 27 analysis, the result indicator R.40 *(number of supported smart village strategies)* had not been programmed in most Member States that support Smart Villages through LEADER. Several CSPs explicitly stated that target values would only be established once the LAG Local Development Strategies (LDSs) had been approved, including those of Slovenia, Belgium–Flanders, Greece, Czechia and Latvia.

The responses to the managing authority questionnaire under this study therefore provide the first systematic review of the outcomes of this bottom-up process, drawing on responses from 9 of the 13 Member States.

Table 3: Share of LAGs that programmed Smart Villages through LEADER in selected Member States & number of planned smart village strategies and projects

Member State	LAGs with SV	Total LAGs	Share	Planned strategies / projects (R.40)*
Belgium-Flanders	15	15	100%	86 Smart village projects planned across the 15 LDSs; 73 estimated to have been realised
Bulgaria	91	97	94%	91 smart village strategies
Latvia[7]	27	33	82%	R.40 not selected by any LAG; no planned number available
Croatia	39	56	70%	868 projects contributing to Smart Villages; no additional smart village strategies planned
Slovenia	24	37	65%	24 approved LDSs include R.40; most LAGs have published calls, but R.40 has not yet been reached
Greece	24	50	48%	28 smart village strategies
Sweden	18	40	43%	153 smart village strategies
Estonia	10	26	38%	At least 40-50 village areas estimated (derived from community development measures, not an R.40 target)
Czechia	1	180	<1%	1 (not yet achieved)

*NB: The above numbers are self-reported by Managing Authorities through the Study's survey and need to be cross-checked against the Catalogue of CAP interventions.

[7] In Latvia, 27 of 33 LAGs have included support for Smart Villages in their LDS. However, none has selected the indicator R.40, and no information is available on the planned number of smart village strategies. The Latvian figures therefore reflect an intention to support Smart Villages rather than formal programming against indicator R.40, and are not directly comparable with those reported by Member States that have set R.40 targets.

The level of uptake varies considerably across Member States. However, this alone is not necessarily an indication of how effectively the Smart Village approach is being implemented.

Regarding funding, most Member States are unable to specify the budget that will ultimately be allocated to Smart Villages, as funding decisions are made by LAGs through their LDS. In general, no additional funding is provided to LAGs specifically for the implementation of Smart Villages.

Only two Member States reported budgets that appear to be explicitly earmarked for Smart Villages. In Bulgaria, a total of EUR 2 275 000 has been allocated across 91 LAGs for 91 smart village strategies. In Greece, according to the approved LDSs, the total budget for actions related to the planning and implementation of Smart Villages amounts to EUR 1 176 476.04, with 28 smart village strategies expected to be funded in 24 LAGs. These allocations correspond to averages of approximately EUR 25 000 per smart village strategy in Bulgaria and EUR 42 000 in Greece.

The distinction between smart village strategies and smart village projects is not always clear in several Member States. Based on the information provided, many LAGs seem to be funding individual smart village projects rather than supporting the preparation and implementation of integrated smart village strategies (e.g. as in Croatia, Belgium-Flanders, Estonia, Latvia and Sweden).

Moreover, the one-to-one correspondence between the number of LAGs and the R.40 target in some Member States (e.g. Bulgaria and Slovenia) may indicate either a relatively low level of ambition (e.g. one strategy per LAG) or that the indicator might be effectively being fulfilled through the LDS itself rather than by counting distinct smart village strategies (NB: this finding has to be verified, as according to interviewees, the European Commission has advised Member States not to count LDSs as smart village strategies).

Greece stands out as the only Member State in this group to have established a **comprehensive national framework (including eligibility criteria) for implementing Smart Villages under LEADER**. Its approach is explicitly based on smart village action plans covering territories with less than 10 000 inhabitants.

The regulatory framework and guidelines have been adopted, the IT system for submitting proposals is operational, and LAGs are currently consulting local communities in preparation for the first calls, expected to open from July 2026 and conclude in the autumn.

Greece applies a two-stage model – support for the preparation of smart village action plans followed by optional funding for their implementation – that is closer to the approaches adopted in Poland and Hungary than to the predominantly project-based models observed elsewhere.

It is worth highlighting the situation in Czechia. Although all LAGs were required to explain in their LDS how LEADER/CLLD would contribute to the Smart Villages concept, only one of the country's 180 LAGs (LAG Říčansko) selected result indicator R.40, with a target value of one smart village strategy.

Key findings

Eligibility arrangements vary considerably, reflecting different conceptions of Smart Village ownership. In Member States that support Smart Villages through LEADER only, eligibility generally follows the standard LEADER rules. LAGs perform a range of roles, from sole applicant or umbrella coordinator, through facilitator, to being excluded from applying (e.g. Greece).

Municipalities are recognised as key partners in some Member States, while in others they are not mandatory partners. A notable innovation is the **explicit lowering of entry barriers for informal community groups through the eligibility of natural persons** (e.g. Latvia) **or non-incorporated associations** (e.g. Flanders), in recognition of the fact that many rural community actors lack formal legal structures.

Effective implementation of Smart Villages therefore requires eligibility and financing rules – including co-financing rates – that are calibrated to the financial and administrative capacity of actors the approach seeks to empower, and that thereby enable broad participation.

Eligible activities across Member States are mostly process- and community-oriented rather than investment-driven. In Member States without dedicated Smart Village interventions, eligible activities generally follow the standard LEADER rules.

Where specific provisions exist, the emphasis is consistently on capacity building, community engagement, cooperation, training and animation, with several Member States explicitly supporting the preparation of smart village strategies and long-term development plans as eligible activities in their own right (e.g. Latvia and Bulgaria).

Physical investments are comparatively limited and, where supported, consist mainly of small-scale community infrastructure typical of LEADER projects (e.g. community centres, multifunctional spaces and meeting places) designed to facilitate social interaction and service provision.

Thematically, activities focus predominantly on social cohesion, local services, volunteering, inclusion, mobility and community participation, while economic development, climate action and digitalisation receive relatively little attention. Digital elements are generally framed as one possible means of achieving community objectives rather than as defining features of Smart Villages.

Overall, the evidence suggests that Member States increasingly interpret Smart Villages as a community-led development process, in which the 'smartness' lies in how communities identify priorities, build partnerships and develop long-term strategies, rather than in the specific types of activities or technologies they implement.

3.2.3. Progress with calls and applications

Three of the five Member States consulted for this study have launched Smart Village calls (Finland, Italy, Lithuania), while in Hungary and Poland, the dedicated calls are still under preparation. The calls are managed centrally by the Ministry and/or managing authority in Finland, Hungary and Lithuania, whereas in Italy and Poland, they are primarily managed by regional authorities within a nationally defined framework.

In all five Member States, LAGs play the main delivery role. The readiness of the paying agency and IT system has been a key factor influencing the timing of call launches, e.g. in Finland and Poland.

The table below summarises the main characteristics of the Smart Village calls in each Member State. It reflects the live calls in Finland, Lithuania and Italy, while the entries for Hungary and Poland describe the planned design of their forthcoming calls. For Poland, the table also notes the parameters of the ongoing LEADER-supported preparation of Smart Village concepts.

Table 4: Characteristics of Smart Village calls in studied Member States

Country	Published	When	Who runs it
Finland	Yes	Continuous open call since spring 2024 (rolling, no deadline)	Ministry sets conditions (national regulation); paying agency launches / administers; two routes: ELY / Economic Development Centres and LEADER
Lithuania	Yes	Four calls: Q2 2024, Q3 2024, Q1-Q2 2025, Q4 2025 Fifth call expected in Q3-Q4 2026	Ministry of Agriculture is the main responsible organisation (selection previously with PA, then moved to MA). Umbrella model – the LAG coordinates and pre-selects the constituent projects, then submits one joint strategy application
Italy	Yes	First calls mid-2023; 17 calls to date in various regions[8]	Regionalised – eight regional managing authorities under intervention SRG07 already published calls, two are planning to; each designs, publishes and selects according to its own criteria; guidance from the National CAP Network.

[8] Basilicata, Campania, Liguria, Lombardia, Marche, Piemonte, Sicilia, Toscana, Umbria, Veneto. Basilicata and Liguria had not yet published calls at the date of finalisation of this study.

Country	Published	When	Who runs it
Hungary	No – in preparation	Target Q4 2026	Drafted by CAP National Network and managing authority with Ministry and Paying Agency input
Poland	No – in preparation	Not before September 2026	One call expected to be launched by each voivodeship (regional) self-government

The situation is structurally different in Member States implementing Smart Villages through LEADER, where **dedicated Smart Village calls are not commonly used**. Among the respondent countries, only Sweden has completed dedicated calls for smart village strategies, while Greece and Bulgaria are preparing dedicated calls for launch in 2026.

In the remaining six respondent countries – Latvia, Estonia, Belgium-Flanders, Slovenia, Croatia and Czechia – no separate Smart Village calls exist, nor are any foreseen. Instead, Smart Villages are supported through general LAG calls, either as an eligible theme or through the selection of result indicator R.40 by individual applicants.

In all nine Member States, responsibility for launching calls rests with the LAGs, while managing authorities are primarily responsible for establishing the implementation framework and providing guidance on the use of result indicator R.40.

Table 5: Smart Village calls published in Member States implementing the concept through LEADER

Country	Published	When	Who runs it
Sweden	Yes – dedicated	18 completed calls for smart village strategies	LAGs. Operations may take the form of umbrella or ordinary projects; must fit the LAG strategy
Greece	Under preparation – dedicated	First calls expected July 2026; all calls expected to conclude by autumn 2026	LAGs, within a national regulatory framework and guidelines issued centrally; IT system completed; LAGs currently consulting local populations
Bulgaria	Under preparation – dedicated (tbc)	Q4 2026 and during 2027	LAGs; MA provided guidance during LDS preparation
Latvia	No separate calls	Smart Villages supported within general LAG calls	LAGs, several of which grant priority or enhanced support intensity to Smart Village projects and/or support strategy preparation through LAG cooperation projects
Belgium – Flanders	No targeted calls	An estimated 90 general LAG calls since mid-2023	LAGs; calls are not targeted; three broad themes apply region-wide: villages, biodiversity and landscape, and farming and local food systems
Croatia	No targeted calls	LAGs began publishing calls in December 2024	LAGs; no separate Smart Village calls are launched
Slovenia	No targeted calls	No special public calls for Smart Villages are planned	LAGs publish general calls listing the indicators applicants may select, including R.40
Estonia	No separate calls	Smart Villages is a theme under community-development measures	LAGs; Estonia has no separate Smart Village programme with dedicated funding nor a distinct implementation framework
Czechia	No	No separate call or budget for Smart Village projects	LAGs; only one LAG programmed R.40

In countries where Smart Villages are supported through LEADER, the exact number of smart village strategies and projects cannot be identified until the projects are selected. Instead, they can only be identified rather retrospectively through the result indicator selected by the applicant or the LAG. Croatia explicitly highlighted this as a key implementation challenge, noting that identifying which LEADER projects contribute to Smart Villages is the most difficult aspect of implementation. At the same time, some Member States (e.g. Belgium-Flanders) indicated that thematic focus and target values are often provided at the application stage by applicants, which provides information on the planned scope of projects and expected indicators.

3.3. Common challenges during implementation

- **The interpretation and operationalisation of the Smart Village definition**. Different understandings influence all stages of implementation, from policy design and guidance to project development, assessment and delivery. In particular, respondent Member States reported differing views on what distinguishes a smart village strategy from conventional cooperation or individual projects, what constitutes 'smartness' or innovation, and how these concepts should be applied consistently.

These differences have led to varying implementation approaches among managing authorities, LAGs, regions and applicants, reflected in eligibility criteria, and in the difficulties in assessing proposals and advising beneficiaries. Only in a few cases, Smart Villages have been interpreted primarily as digitalisation initiatives.

The challenge is particularly significant where Smart Villages are delivered through LEADER, as responsibility for interpreting and applying the concept is most often delegated to LAGs. They are then responsible for defining eligibility criteria, advising applicants and assessing whether proposals reflect the Smart Village approach (translating broad policy guidance into local practice).

Several Member States therefore highlighted the need for additional EU and/or national guidance to promote a more consistent interpretation, while others underlined the importance of awareness-raising, peer learning and capacity-building activities.

- **Community capacity and local leadership**. Across Member States, successful Smart Village implementation depends on active communities and committed local leaders. At the same time, several countries note that some rural areas have more limited organisational, financial and administrative capacity to develop and implement complex, long-term projects. Mobilising stakeholders, generating high-quality project ideas and sustaining collaborative initiatives over time remain difficult, particularly in remote or less active areas.

Several Member States also reported that implementation often relies on a relatively small number of highly engaged local actors, creating risks of uneven territorial coverage and leadership burnout. In addition, some countries reported that community actors tend to engage more readily in concrete, project-based activities than in the longer-term strategic planning that underpins the Smart Village approach.

- **Identification of the most appropriate governance and implementation arrangements for Smart Villages, particularly where implementation is managed at regional level**. In these cases, ensuring that regional approaches fully reflect the principles of the place-based, community-led approach can require additional coordination and dialogue. More specifically, there is a need to ensure that implementation frameworks promote strong local partnerships involving villages, municipalities and other stakeholders, and that interventions respond to locally identified needs. Examples of this were reported in Finland and Italy.

In Italy, regional managing authorities tend to structure calls along sectoral lines (e.g. supply chains, environmental cooperation). Regional MAs often deliberately choose to use regional SRG07 interventions for broader thematic or system-level priorities, while LAGs are better placed to implement the more participatory and place-based dimension of Smart Villages. Therefore, the integrated and place-based strategic feature of the Smart Village approach is often absent at regional level.

At the same time, the experience illustrated in Case Study No 3 in Finland suggests that the regional approach can also create opportunities to strengthen dialogue between regional authorities and local communities, helping regional interventions to become more responsive to local needs.

- **Strategic coherence and financing**. Several countries reported that applicants (i.e. local communities or Smart Villages project promoters) frequently face difficulties developing integrated, place-based strategies that combine interconnected actions around clearly defined local needs and shared objectives.

Experience (e.g. Lithuania and EVV LAG in Italy) suggests this capacity can be strengthened through iterative learning, practical guidance and quality assurance during strategy development.

At the same time, securing co-financing emerges as an important but often under-recognised barrier. In several Member States, limited financial capacity, particularly among NGOs and community organisations, reduces the ability of some local actors to participate fully in Smart Village initiatives. Municipalities are often better placed to mobilise resources or act as financial partners.

Overall, the evidence across countries suggests that, beyond defining the Smart Village concept, its successful implementation depends on communities having both the strategic capacity to develop coherent interventions and the financial capacity to deliver them. Continued support for strategy development and appropriate financing arrangements can therefore play an important role in enabling a broad range of local actors to participate effectively.

4. Lessons from the implementation of Smart Villages

Lesson 1. Smart Villages are defined by the community strategic process

The working definition of Smart Villages[9] contains all the key components of the approach and has been taken over directly into many CAP Strategic Plans. However, translating the concept into practice remains challenging. Interpretations still differ regarding what 'smartness' means, what distinguishes a smart village strategy from a conventional cooperation project, and how these elements should be applied consistently.

Three points from the Smart Rural 21 Guidebook are reinforced by the present evidence:

- **'Smart' does not mean 'digital'. In the context of Smart Villages, innovation means new kinds of solutions that respond to community needs and bring about systemic change**, with a strong social innovation dimension. This is reflected both in Lithuania's reference to innovative, systemic, change-oriented solutions and in Finland's assessment of how boldly projects create new activities, opportunities, partnerships or operating models. Smartness therefore lies in the process – in how a community builds a shared vision through engagement and partnership, and then finds innovative ways of realising it.
- **The smart village strategy is the tool** through which a local vision is formed, as illustrated by the Lithuanian and EVV LAG examples. It is the main distinguishing feature of the approach, because it links separate initiatives and helps communities to think holistically rather than pursuing short-term, one-off projects.
- **The target entity is the local rural community**. Communities and villages should have direct access to support, with cooperation between neighbouring communities strongly encouraged where challenges cut across administrative boundaries, as in the Finnish regional, Hungarian, Lithuanian and EVV LAG approaches.

The support frameworks examined in the study align with the above characteristics, focusing on strategies at the level of the individual local community or of groups of neighbouring communities. These cover territories ranging from a single village to a micro-region (district, smaller areas within the LEADER area), where a suitable coordinating body, such as a LEADER LAG, is able to support the process. Greater operational clarity on 'smartness', on smart village strategies, and on the relationship between strategies and projects would support more consistent implementation.

9 Pilot Study on Smart Eco-social Villages, 2019

Other approaches tested by Member States carry real advantages, but also some risks, as presented in the table below.

Table 6: Advantages and risks of various approaches supporting Smart Villages

Design choice	Advantages	Disadvantages
Supporting **project plans** instead of strategies	Simpler process; communities can start faster on specific priorities	Weakens the long-term strategic thinking and holistic community planning that are the core of the approach
Supporting **territorial 'village' strategies** (smaller areas within the LEADER areas, district)	Stronger territorial planning and coordination	Weaker community ownership; less attention to individual communities' needs
Region-wide approaches	Draw attention to rural needs across a whole region (see Case Study No 3)	Local needs less visible; scale pushes projects towards thematic cooperation only

Lesson 2. Preparation determines the quality of smart village strategies and actions

Across both delivery models – dedicated CSP intervention and LEADER – preparation emerges as one of the strongest factors improving the quality of smart village strategies and projects.

In Finland, applicants typically engage with the LEADER LAG or Economic Development (former ELY) Centre at the idea stage (i.e. before any formal application) to discuss the suitability of the idea and possible funding routes. In Italy, regions and LAGs that invested in animation, communication and advisory support received better-developed applications. Lithuania identifies early consultation, active facilitation and the sharing of good practice examples among the main success factors.

Dedicated funding for the preparation phase is a good practice. Finland provides a separate preparatory grant of EUR 5 000 as a lump sum, with 106 preparatory projects financed to date (Case Studies No 2 and 3). This has been found particularly effective in bringing municipalities into the process.

Poland funds the preparation of Smart Village concepts through grants of approximately EUR 4 600 covering five concepts. Hungary has built a preparation phase into its forthcoming call, with a flat rate of up to 25% of eligible costs. Greece makes both the establishment of the collaborative scheme and the preparation of the action plan eligible through a simplified cost option, including applicants that seek support for the preparatory phase only.

> Where preparation is explicitly resourced, applicants are better organised, partnerships are more genuine and strategies more coherent. Preparation support requires time, facilitation, advisory services and continuous engagement. Where cooperation between multiple actors is expected, allocating sufficient time and resources to preparation is a precondition for effective implementation.

Lesson 3. Community facilitation is a distinct task requiring its own resources

The strong emphasis on animation, capacity building and community engagement in LEADER-supported Smart Village interventions follows from the LEADER delivery model. Where Smart Villages are supported through general LEADER calls, eligible activities mirror standard LEADER practice. Also, since LAGs are typically given no dedicated Smart Village budget, larger investments rarely appear among supported activities.

Developing a genuine smart village strategy is a resource-intensive process requiring continuous facilitation, technical expertise and trust building over an extended period. The EVV LAG experience shows that the scale of effort required often exceeds the financial and human resources available to LAGs.

Support needs to shift from primarily financing projects towards strengthening the community-led planning process: helping communities to develop long-term visions, facilitating participatory planning, strengthening local leadership, building cross-sector partnerships and preparing coherent strategies. This requires both dedicated animation resources and enhanced facilitation skills.

LEADER LAGs have so far received no additional resources for supporting Smart Villages. Smart Village animation could be recognised as a distinct task with its own resourcing, rather than being assumed to be absorbed within existing LEADER budgets.

Lesson 4. LEADER is pivotal, but its added value depends on the model applied

In all cases examined, LEADER LAGs play a pivotal role in the planning and implementation of Smart Villages. This reflects the shared basic principles of the two approaches – place-based, community-led, strategy-based and oriented towards innovation – and the proximity of LAGs to municipalities, villages and other local actors with limited capacity to prepare integrated strategies or develop projects on their own.

LEADER is nonetheless being used in two distinct ways, with different results:

- Where **LAGs support individual smart village projects** through standard LEADER delivery mechanisms, the distinction between LEADER and Smart Villages is less straightforward and the added value of Smart Villages is correspondingly more limited.
- Where **LAGs** take on the broader role of **supporting communities in developing integrated strategies** – fostering long-term strategic thinking and visioning, and accompanying implementation over time – the Smart Village approach becomes visible as a distinct development process. The Escartons (EVV) LAG in Italy illustrates this: the core principles of the LEADER method – participatory governance, strategic planning and long-term community visioning – are applied directly at community level (Case Study No 5).

LEADER can support Smart Villages along a spectrum from project financing to full facilitation of community-led strategic development. The latter is where the method delivers most, and where the added value of Smart Villages over standard LEADER practice is more demonstrable.

Lesson 5. Smart village strategies need a credible funding pathway to implementation

A smart village strategy should be treated as the starting point for community-led implementation. Where no financing for implementation follows, there is a risk of stakeholder fatigue and disillusionment.

Several Member States link strategy preparation to implementation. Latvia combines support for strategy preparation with preferential access to Smart Village funding for communities. Greece finances both preparation and implementation. Bulgaria links infrastructure eligibility to Smart Village concepts. Poland connects Smart Village concepts prepared under LEADER to subsequent investment funding through the dedicated I.10.10.B intervention.

Lithuania, Hungary and Italian LAGs such as EVV similarly pair strategy development with funding for priority actions. Finland, Lithuania, Hungary and Escartons (EVV) additionally apply a staged process. Finland's preparatory grants of around EUR 5 000 enable communities to refine ideas, build partnerships, engage municipalities and test feasibility before larger commitments. Lithuania and Escartons (EVV) use one-to-one

consultation and repeated feedback loops during the application process to manage expectations and ensure the quality of approved strategies. Hungary plans to provide funding in two stages, first for the development of settlement-level strategies and then for their implementation.

The preferred approach is to treat strategy development and initial implementation as a single package – a lump sum or dedicated budget covering both the participatory strategy process and a first portfolio of priority actions. In the Lithuanian and EVV LAG models, the strategy is the application, ensuring that successful applicants have direct access to implementation funding.

Where such an approach is not feasible, explicit links to implementation funding can be created for projects implementing an approved smart village strategy. These can include additional selection points, higher aid intensity, reserved budgets or preferential access to other schemes, as envisaged in Poland and already practised in parts of Latvia. Even modest implementation funding is usually enough to demonstrate that community-led planning produces tangible change.

Lesson 6. Smart Villages is an application of the EU's subsidiarity principle and multi-level governance is what makes it work

At its core, the approach applies two foundational principles of EU governance. Subsidiarity, as set out in Article 5(3) TFEU, holds that decisions should be taken as closely as possible to citizens, with higher levels acting only where objectives cannot be sufficiently achieved at lower territorial levels. Applied to Smart Villages, this means that strategic planning should take place as close as possible to the rural community itself, and that communities should be empowered to shape and govern their own development.

Subsidiarity does not require decisions at the lowest possible level, but at the lowest level capable of acting effectively. Many rural communities currently lack the administrative, financial or organisational capacity to plan and implement complex strategies, and some challenges genuinely extend beyond a single settlement. The appropriate response is not to shift responsibility permanently upwards but to strengthen local capacity so that decision-making can progressively move closer to the community.

This is where multi-level governance complements subsidiarity: subsidiarity indicates where responsibility should lie, while multi-level governance provides the arrangements through which higher levels of governance enable local action. LEADER LAGs illustrate the relationship. Operating at sub-regional scale with territorial knowledge, participatory experience and established networks, they can perform functions that individual communities cannot yet perform.

The same reasoning exposes the limits of a predominantly regional approach. Evidence from the examined Member States suggests that regional authorities are often too distant from individual communities to understand or respond to their specific needs; locating implementation primarily at regional level shifts strategic decision-making away from the communities concerned. This does not mean that regional authorities have no role – coordination, funding and certain policy functions are best exercised at that level, particularly where challenges are territorial in scale.

There is no single optimal governance scale. Responsibility should rest at the lowest level able to act effectively, while multi-level governance secures the resources, expertise and coordination that make this possible. The policy question is therefore not which level to choose – the village, the LAG or the region – but how to design governance arrangements that progressively move responsibility closer to rural communities as their capacity grows.

Annex I: Overview of direct Smart Village interventions in Member States

Country	Responsible entities	Beneficiaries	Themes	Eligibility	Selection criteria	Budget
Finland	MA = Ministry of Agriculture & Forestry (conditions via national regulation); Paying agency (launch/admin, e-system); delivery via ELY / Economic Development Centres (umbrella projects) + LEADER groups (local)	Cooperation partnerships (min. 2, usually 3+) under the 'community model': non-profits, educational/ community bodies; private firms only if they fit. Regional village associations lead umbrella projects.	Main themes include security & preparedness, habitability, energy/village infrastructure. Digitalisation is cross-cutting, but not strictly required.	Cooperation project (not a strategy); partnership required; community-model actors; electronic application only	Four weighted criteria: CAP/regional objectives 30%; cost-effectiveness 10%; need/knowledge/ commitment 30%; renewal & new partnerships 30%	LEADER ≤ EUR 200k/project; ELY route no fixed ceiling; EUR 5k preparatory lump sum. Aid up to 100% for cooperation intervention (up to 65% for investment)
Lithuania	MA = Ministry of Agriculture (calls, rules, selection committee from 2026, final decision by Minister/ MA); Paying agency (evaluation/ supervision by agency Director); LAG Network and Lithuanian Rural Network support	Umbrella model – LAG as coordinator & umbrella beneficiary + project-promoter partners (included in application); one joint application. Three-sector partnerships (municipalities + NGOs/ communities + SMEs)	Sustainable rural development (economic/ social/ environmental); social inclusion (R.42) & infrastructure (R.41) dominant, economic growth (R.47) and agriculture (R.3) are less common.	Strategy-based; projects interconnected, single theme (from Call 3); ≥1 of four indicators (R.3/R.37/ R.41/R.42); each LAG sets own project-selection method and criteria, described in strategy	National quality criteria for selection of LAG smart village strategies: innovation ('smartness'), digital services, service development, youth/ research / investor involvement, territorial impact, sustainability	Strategy caps: EUR 500k (1 LAG) / EUR 600k (2) / EUR 700k (3) Co-financing 85% community/social, 65% business, 40% municipal infrastructure ~EUR 2.3m approved (4 strategies)
Italy	National MA provides framework; 10 regional MAs design/ publish/ select/ budget calls under SRG07; CAP Network (CREA) support & methodologies; ~120 out of 200 LAGs implement locally	Partnerships – lead beneficiary + min. 1 additional partner. By theme: agri co-ops, farm organisations, agri-food firms, producer networks (food); social co-ops & NGOs (social); forestry enterprises (forestry)	Food systems, local supply chains and local markets (the most common focus across the 8 regions); environmental / agro-climate and biodiversity cooperation; social cooperation, forestry cooperation.	Cooperation project (not a strategy) + partnership; no strong smart village strategy requirement at national level. Two mechanisms: fund cooperation costs only (+ other interventions) or fund both running cost & intervention	Set regionally or by LAGs if they implement SRG07 or other SV interventions, vary widely; no central criteria supplied; no consolidated national selection data	Regional: ~EUR 300–400k up to EUR 10m per call 17 calls / 8 regions so far On the LEADER side ~ EUR 87m linked to R.40
Poland	MA = Ministry of Agriculture (amending aid guidelines); voivodeship self-governments launch direct I.10.10.B (investment) calls; Paying agency; LAGs run LEADER (I.13.1) Smart Village concept grant calls	I.10.10.B: municipality / inter-municipal association (investor); LEADER I.13.1: LAGs grant to grantees (local communities) preparing Smart Village concepts; implementation projects follow	Quality of life, demographic decline, public services, environment/ climate, employment, digital inclusion; concept needs digital/ environmental/ climate component	Smart Village concept grants: area ≤20 000 residents not covered by another concept; digital/ telecom tech or better use of knowledge; community benefit; LDS-consistent; partnership + community consultation; must contain process description, SWOT, involvement plan, project list	LAGs set own eligibility/ selection; recommended ranking – best Smart Village concepts get premium points, integrated operations, innovative operations (innovation defined at LDS level) LDS assessment: extra point for including Smart Villages	Smart Village concept grant ≥ PLN 20 000 (multiple of PLN 4 000/ concept, ≥5 concepts) Direct I.10.10.B regulations/ budget not yet set 44 LEADER Smart Village concept calls announced by 2 Jul 2026 across 9 voivodeships
Hungary	MA call design; CAP Network support; Paying agency (Treasury) execution, recommended separate call; Delivery entirely via LEADER	Private/legal persons, non-profits, associations, cooperatives, municipalities, LEADER LAGs (LAG as coordinator / 'market leader')	Projects under a grant-funded smart village strategy; strong LAG interest in digital but MA stresses "smart ≠ digital"; projects span 2-10 settlements	Smart Villages must be in the LAG's approved LDS (hard precondition); detailed settlement strategy not required at application – strategy is a funded output, projects follow	Not yet finalised (call in preparation); selection via an expert committee, not the Treasury alone	Envelope HUF 1.6 bn (~EUR 84k avg/ settlement, ~30 applicants) – a ceiling; up to 25% flat rate for strategy prep/general costs; remaining-cost mechanism under discussion; 24-month implementation

Annex II: Case Studies

SMART VILLAGES · CASE STUDY NO. 1
Stanz im Mürztal, Austria – The smart journey of an (energy) community

THE CONTEXT

Energy.Digital.Stanzertal builds on Stanz im Mürztal's long-standing work on energy resilience by exploring how the energy transition can also strengthen social cohesion, supported also through the Smart Rural projects. The community's energy cooperative now has around 100 members and recently expanded its renewable energy portfolio by adding a hydropower plant to its existing solar installations. This increased local energy self-consumption from around 30% to more than 75%.

Electricity is supplied to cooperative members at a fixed price throughout the year, prioritising stability and resilience over the lowest market price. The project builds directly on the village's Smart Rural 21 strategy and earlier initiatives, including token and digital currency pilots, which laid the foundations for its implementation.

AT A GLANCE

BENEFICIARY
Consortium: Stanz im Mürztal, the Stanzertal Energy Community, SCAN – Agency for Market and Social Research

Cooperation partners: two local farmers and the LEADER LAG Mariazellerland–Mürztal

VILLAGE
Stanz im Mürztal, Austria

SUPPORT
Local Innovation Partnership (LIP) under intervention 77-03

FUNDING
EUR 350 000 (~EUR 300 000 for personnel, ~EUR 50 000 for investment); 3 years

STATUS
Contract mid-2026; implementation from autumn 2026

CONTACT
Rainer Rosegger, SCAN

"If you begin from scratch, this may not be the right funding – you need a concept and a vision first, and that takes time. We worked ours out in Smart Rural 21."

Fritz Pichler, Stanz im Mürztal

THE METHOD

The central idea of the project is not only to optimise regional energy flows, but to explore how the energy transition and digitalisation can contribute to social cohesion, volunteering, local value creation and new forms of cooperation within the community. Its guiding idea is a three-part concept – **energy sovereignty, the Energy Shed, and 'energy in place'**.

The **Energy Shed** treats a valley as an energy basin, analogous to a watershed: the community organises production and consumption around the resources within its own territory, cooperating with neighbours. Farmers are integral, as they own the land and biomass, and act as **flexible consumers**.

'Energy in place' brings in culture and resilience, deliberately shifting the conversation away from kilowatt-hours and cost. A core strand **scales the village's digital token/wallet pilot from 10 to 100 households and prepares a community battery-storage** business case. The token/wallet approach is not purely an energy-management tool but is intended to connect energy-related incentives with community and regional benefits.

The project can later enable market-based investments, such as community battery storage or shared renewable generation. Viability hinges on a new Austrian grid-fee regulation due in January 2027.

WHY IT WORKS FOR SMART VILLAGES

Energy has been one of the most important topics in local smart development. The Energy Shed is a place-based framework for organising the regional energy transition around local resources, actors and needs. It connects energy production and consumption with flexibility, data, governance, local business models and social innovation. This process has been highly aligned and supported through the European Commission's Smart Rural process, and later through the national support framework for Smart Villages.

Local and regional linkages play a crucial role. The aim is not to create an isolated energy system, but to strengthen the region's capacity to organise and benefit from its own energy transition. The Austrian Local Innovation Partnership (LIP) model – one of the Smart Village interventions in Austria – funds **governance, business models and digital pilots, not hardware** – highlighting the strengths of the Austrian model where Smart Villages are delivered through cooperation and innovation interventions, and 'smart' means integrated, place-based problem-solving.

The promoter chose the LIP over the parallel innovation-network route because it is "more practical" and the partners were already known. The local LEADER LAG has supported the process, recognising the potential of Stanz. The managing authority supported the village in the scheme, recognising its Smart Rural track record.

LESSONS LEARNT — FOR BENEFICIARIES

The EIP instrument to support Smart Villages in Austria, mostly suits the prepared, not beginners. A LIP works because Stanz already had a concept and vision from earlier, including its Smart Rural 21 track record. Preparatory support and a long-term community process are the precondition for this type of support.

Fund governance and business models, not hardware. The LIP develops the Energy Shed governance, token system and storage business case, enabling later market-based investment (community batteries, shared wind).

Integrating local needs with the regional scope. The project builds on a comparatively strong level of local engagement and established cooperation structures. Its success largely depends on the outcomes of the negotiations with regional grid operators.

Local needs-driven actions should be the driving force. While the LIP and Local Innovation Networks (LIN) calls in Austria have a regional focus, it is important that concepts are driven by the local community as regional actors often do not fully recognise local needs. The Stanz example demonstrates how local, LAG and regional perspectives can be effectively brought together.

The LAG enables local cooperation. Cooperation runs through the Mariazellerland–Mürztal LAG, which represents several municipalities – and it is the means by which follower villages can learn from Stanz.

SMART VILLAGES · CASE STUDY NO. 2
NOSTERIIHI, Finland – A preparatory grant for a village fibre cooperative

THE PROJECT

NOSTERIIHI is one of the hundred lump-sum (EUR 5 000) Smart Village **preparatory projects** in Finland, which aim to prepare the ground – define the objectives, partners and measures – of a future Smart Village cooperation project. The project aims to highlight the crucial role of information technology for sparsely populated rural areas and villages.

Together, fibre and electricity form the critical infrastructure the information society rests on. It focuses on the infrastructure and competence a rural village network in Finland needs **to move into the information society**: energy performance of equipment rooms, cost-effective procurement and construction, precision positioning, IoT, open-source development, village security and resilience to climate extremes.

THE FORM OF SUPPORT

A EUR 5 000 lump sum, fully publicly funded, awarded under the Smart Village cooperation sub-measure. Eligibility depends on a plan showing the applicant has done preparatory work and thinking, with limited administrative burden. This form of support has been highly popular in Finland with more than 100 preparatory projects funded by early 2026.

WHY IT WORKS FOR SMART VILLAGES

Rural project plans are often not sufficiently elaborated – not because rural actors lack ideas, but because nobody pays for scoping, partner search and technical diligence before a project is launched. The preparatory project support has been flexible and allowed outputs to be ideas, contacts and structures.

Two years on, the traceable consequences include a smart-lock pilot with a Finnish IoT manufacturer (a partner found only after testing and rejecting others), a village radio pilot, and a new partnership with regional radio amateurs on village security. A **municipal village agreement mechanism** has also been introduced, tying municipal support to a village development plan. None were deliverables – all are effects.

AT A GLANCE

BENEFICIARY
Kuhmo Village Network Cooperative

PLACE
Kuhmo, Kainuu – sparsely populated eastern border region

MUNICIPALITY
Kuhmo

SUPPORT
Smart Village preparatory grant: EUR 5 000 lump sum, 100% public funding

ROUTE
Assessed and recommended by Elävä Kainuu LEADER; administered by the Kainuu ELY Centre

FUND
EAFRD / CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027, LEADER intervention

STATUS
Completed June 2024; outputs published in Finnish and English (https://nettinoste.fi/wp/smart-rural-27/)

CONTACT
Philip Donner · nettinoste.fi

"The smart rural preparatory project is foremostly an analytical exercise. Concepts are being formulated and refined. Then they are validated and integrated into a larger meaningful whole which is easy to understand and learn in the collaborative community."

Philip Donner, Kuhmo Village Network

LESSONS LEARNT — FOR BENEFICIARIES

Preparatory grants like this are critical. A small, unconditional grant helps the preparation that makes the next application credible. This had been highlighted for policymakers for a while, and the Finnish Smart Villages preparatory call has made it possible. Its value is the freedom and flexibility. The grant was used to bring critical validation to a practical level.

The conditions for IT development have to be created in every rural community, especially sparsely populated areas. Support for information society construction must be designed to produce covering networks, with enough access and backbone capacity reserved for every permanent resident and business. Local capacity has to be built and local IT competence needs to be restored. Centralising and outsourcing IT for short-term savings has produced long-term neglect.

Pilot actions need to be more widely supported. Pilot actions are often not recognised by local decision-makers, yet they are critical for smart rural development. It is a way to avoid investment errors. Small-scale pilot projects should be more effectively supported. Preparation and piloting are one continuous method.

Villages are more than village associations. The system recognises villages and for-profit companies. A cooperative or social enterprise is a wider entity, and as such, it falls between them and is often invisible to parts of the support structure. Social enterprises – cooperatives operating for the communities' benefit on a non-profit basis – should be better recognised and integrated in Smart Village planning.

Village plans are useful only as long as follow-up support is provided. The challenge with Kuhmo's early push for village plans collapsed because nothing was attached to them; the village agreement works because support is conditional on the plan. The preparatory work on the plan was followed by specific pilot actions two years on.

SMART VILLAGES · CASE STUDY NO. 3
South Savo Village Safety, Finland – a regional project built from the bottom up

THE CONTEXT

In South Savo, villages and the safety authorities had no working connection. The rescue service did not know whom to call in a village, or where people gather. Storms regularly cut electricity for two or three days, while mobile networks fail within two to six hours, leaving communities unreachable exactly when help is needed.

The region has Finland's oldest population and extreme seasonal swings: a municipality of 4 000 residents can hold 20 000 in summer, and second-home owners now stay around 100 days a year – "they are not visiting any more, they are staying."

The project responds by building village safety groups, direct village-to-authority contacts, back-up communication models for when power and phones are down, and village halls equipped to serve as local safety points.

AT A GLANCE

BENEFICIARY
Etelä-Savon kyläturvallisuus – South Savo Village Safety

PLACE
South Savo, Eastern Finland – some 190 villages

SUPPORT
EUR 359 621, 100% public (EU: EUR 154 637; State: EUR 204 984)

ROUTE
ELY route (now the Eastern Finland Vitality Centre)

FUND
Smart Village Cooperation (Cooperation 07, COOP)

STATUS
98 villages engaged and 42 village safety groups formed

CONTACT
Mervi Lintunen, Järvi-Suomen Kylät ry

"Villages want a better connection to the regional level – and we have to prepare these projects well before they start... The need was so big. The villages came so fast that I hadn't even thought it would be this easy."

Mervi Lintunen

THE FORM OF SUPPORT

It is a **Smart Village cooperation project** of the coordination-and-activation type, funded through the ELY / Vitality Centre route rather than LEADER at **EUR 359 621 and 100% public funding**. There is no investment component: the budget covers staff and travel – the coordinator drives some 40 000 km a year across a region of lakes.

Crucially, the application was preceded by the **EUR 5 000 Smart Village preparatory grant** and by roughly **three years of groundwork**, in which every municipality, the county well-being services and the villages were consulted before a line was written. "Two years is so short a time when you are trying to build something new," the coordinator notes; doing the talking first made delivery far faster, "and all are looking in the same direction."

WHY IT WORKS FOR SMART VILLAGES

Regional-scale projects are often criticised as top-down, and the coordinator agrees that authorities previously "made me think that they don't need the villages." What makes this one different is that it is **led by the village movement itself** – by a regional village association whose coordinator has worked with these villages for ten years and sits on the national village movement's board. The **regional scale was also a deliberate choice**,

rather than an imposition: a single-municipality project could never have brought the rescue service, health county and all municipalities to the same table.

Within that frame the method is bottom-up: each village decides its own level of ambition. This can range from simply naming two contact people to equipping a village hall as a safety centre with its own power supply, supported by roughly **two face-to-face sessions per village** and public safety evenings in every municipality.

The learning runs both ways – the authorities, who joined voluntarily with no obligation to do so, now report gaining knowledge that is reshaping their own working methods.

LESSONS LEARNT — FOR BENEFICIARIES

A regional instrument can still serve local needs – if it is led from the local level. The decisive factor here is not the scale but the promoter: a village association with ten years of relationships in the same villages, rather than a regional administration acting on villages' behalf.

Prepare for years, not months. Three years of prior consultation with municipalities, authorities and villages – supported by a small preparatory grant – meant the project could start delivering immediately. A two-year project is too short to build trust and results at the same time.

Let each village set its own level of ambition. Villages choose whether to nominate two contact people or build a fully equipped safety centre. A single regional model with local variation reaches far more communities than a uniform template.

Choose the scale that brings the whole system to the table. Working region-wide, rather than commune by commune, was what made it possible to engage the rescue service, the county health services and every municipality at once – something no single village could achieve alone.

Cooperation works better invited than mandated. No authority was required to take part; they joined because the need was evident. Having done so, they report learning from the villages and adapting their own practice – a two-way gain that an obligation would not have produced.

SMART VILLAGES · CASE STUDY NO. 4

Hilvarenbeek Smart Village, the Netherlands – 'Tussenheid': a facility for local organising capacity

THE CONTEXT

Tussenheid (non-profit organisation) in Hilvarenbeek Smart Village in the Netherlands was created in 2014 as an independent support facility for strengthening **local capacity** of Hilvarenbeek. The Hilvarenbeek municipality is home to some 15 000 people across six villages, with an unusually high number – around 500 – of non-profit associations.

Tussenheid was developed based on the results of a survey, which found that local initiatives struggle with the same five challenges: **strategy, financing, communication, human resources, and finding their way through government and institutions**. Rather than run projects itself, Tussenheid acts as an enabler and a bridge between initiatives and expertise – keeping alive and strengthening the local 'mycelium' of organisations that, between them, reach everyone in the community.

AT A GLANCE

BENEFICIARY
Tussenheid / Hilvarenbeek Smart Village (HSV)

PLACE
Municipality of Hilvarenbeek, North Brabant

VILLAGES
~15 000 inhabitants - 6 villages

SUPPORT
c. EUR 100 000/year in the early phase,
c. EUR 350 000/year later on; EUR 1.26 m programmed 2026-2029

ROUTE
A 10-year deal with the Dutch Ministry of the Interior (BZK) for a 50% public / 50% market model

FUND
Initially LEADER (2024-25), later national, public, private

"We support the local organisations, such as the football club, the bridge club, energy cooperative and they reach everybody. Local people are the basis and they are connected through the 'mycelium'."

Wiet van Meel, Tussenheid Hilvarenbeek

THE FORM OF SUPPORT

Support operates on three connected levels. The first is **consultancy on concrete questions** across the five challenges.

The second **builds capacity** through meetings, animation, courses and knowledge sharing – including a course on finding additional funding that has trained around 50 residents to date.

The third turns **recurring problems into structural improvements**: a local mediation 'court' for spatial-planning disputes condenses procedures – that typically take 4 to 6 years – into weeks. Delivery follows the Brundtland 3P model – **economic (profit), spatial (planet), societal (people)** – requiring every initiative to connect all three aspects rather than focus on a single one.

WHY IT WORKS FOR SMART VILLAGES

The promoter **wrote the region's initial LEADER programme around the Hilvarenbeek Smart Village philosophy** that strengthened linkages between LEADER and the project concept. LEADER initially co-funded the project, complemented by funds from regional and national grants, a regional bank / private funding and volunteers.

Most recently, following its highly positive evaluation, Hilvarenbeek secured a ten-year commitment from the Dutch Ministry of the Interior on a 50-50% public-private model, growing from c. EUR 100 000 to EUR 350 000 a year.

Results are tangible, with hundreds of organisations directly benefitting and the whole community being reached indirectly. 'Smartness' is within the process, including independent bottom-up governance.

LESSONS LEARNT — FOR BENEFICIARIES

Strengthen the 'mycelium' of local initiatives, don't just fund projects. Tussenheid supports the local capacity (rather than running discrete projects) through the c. 500 associations that together reach members of the whole community. The aim is to keep alive and strengthen the local 'mycelium' of initiatives.

Design governance so the aim does not become the target. Independently from government, it is important to be able to operate a project through a collective structure (by engaging the community organisation, board, steering committee) which prevents "an organisation where an aim is becoming the target".

Support is most needed on three lines: consultancy, capacity building and structural problem solving. It is important to dedicate resources and treat community support in a complex way, using the expertise of specialist experts and organisations.

LEADER can provide initial seed funding and animation; however, a more business-oriented and service-oriented approach is needed. LEADER is often unable to fully play the support role that local communities need. A professional advisory service is needed, which enables communities to access funding also on their own later on.

The Tussenheid model is scalable. Similar bottom-up, community-driven models are also set up elsewhere; the Tussenheid model will be scalable and can be recreated in many other communities. Long-term funding will help pioneer the model. The Ministry and relevant regional and national networks can help spread the model further.

SMART VILLAGES · CASE STUDY NO. 5
Escartons e Valli Valdesi, Italy – Enabling small communities to become Smart Villages

THE CONTEXT

GAL Escartons e Valli Valdesi (EVV) is a mountain Local Action Group (LAG) in the Alpine valleys of Piedmont, west of Turin, covering 67 municipalities. An open, opportunity-based Smart Village call drew 59 expressions of interest from across the 67 municipalities and yielded 11 proposals, of which eight were funded (a ninth is sought).

The eight funded Smart Villages span from single-village to multi-municipality scale and cover topics such as food poverty, the digital divide, services for people with specific needs, youth housing, tourism and energy community.

THE FORM OF SUPPORT

The EVV Smart Villages initiative is delivered through **SRG07 – Cooperation for Rural and Local Development and Smart Villages**, implemented within the LEADER SRG06 intervention of the Italian CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 (with no additional funding beyond LEADER).

EVV was one of the Piedmont LAGs to **voluntarily include SRG07 in its Local Development Strategy**, allocating EUR 900 000 from its approximately EUR 5 million LEADER budget. Support combines a year-long preparatory animation and co-design phase with intensive and ongoing support and consultation by the LAG, including capacity building, tutoring and partnership formation. This enables local actors to develop a shared vision, prepare a smart village strategy and build the organisational capacity to mobilise additional funding beyond LEADER.

The preparatory costs (up to EUR 25 000) are eligible, but only if the final version of the strategy is approved. Implementation is financed following the final assessment of the strategy.

AT A GLANCE

BENEFICIARY
GAL Escartons e Valli Valdesi

PLACE
Alpine valleys of Piedmont, Metropolitan City of Turin (Susa, Sangone, Chisone, Germanasca, Pellice)

SUPPORT
EUR 900 000 for SRG07, of ~EUR 5 m for the LAG strategy (LEADER LDS budget)

ROUTE
Village capacity building

FUND
EAFRD / CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 – Cooperation for rural, local and smart villages (SRG07) and LEADER (SRG06)

STATUS

Final strategies due 2 Oct 2026

CONTACT
Carlo Salot & Susanna Gardiol



"A Smart Village begins with a shared, place-based vision. It is strategic before it is tactical: first we decide where we want to go, then we choose the path to get there. The route may change, but you need to know your destination before you start the engine."

Carlo Salot (EVV LAG)

WHY IT WORKS FOR SMART VILLAGES

Funding supports the **governance process** that enables communities to define and implement their own development priorities, instead of prescribing investments from the outset. The LAG accompanies and supports communities all the way, starting from the preparatory phase.

The LAG – involving also a municipality team of six experts – has provided strong animation and support along the way, including partnership formation, needs assessment and prioritisation, and strategy development.

By funding a partnership rather than individual beneficiaries, EVV brings NGOs and non-commercial civil-society bodies into a structured public-private-non-profit system, teaching communities to set a vision and strategy before applying for investment. The selection criteria reward those that map and cooperate with existing municipal strategies, i.e. there is no need to develop a strategy from scratch.

LESSONS LEARNT — FOR BENEFICIARIES

Support local capacity, not just projects. The added value of Smart Villages compared to the standard LEADER approach is supporting communities' capacities to build a shared, long-term vision. Supporting that process – rather than projects only – is what later enables communities to attract other funds on their own.

Empower NGOs and non-commercial bodies. According to the LAG, the Smart Village intervention allows NGOs and non-commercial bodies to be funded, which was limited under standard LEADER projects. Funding a partnership integrates them into a real public-private-non-profit governance system.

Local public authorities are not the main or only drivers of local change. Where municipal capacity is uneven, requiring a compulsory public partner excludes the weakest communities. Encouraging – and rewarding – cooperation with existing municipal strategies results in genuine community-led projects.

Animation is the decisive input. Expert-supported facilitation is what turns interest into coherent strategies, but it depends on a small LAG team and on support the LAG had to fight the region to provide. LAGs need additional financial support as animating the whole process is highly resource-intensive.

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