



inspire
SMART VILLAGE LABS

INSPIRE Smart Village Labs: strategic guiding document of baseline operational model

White Research SRL

January 2026



Funded by
the European Union

Document Information

Issued by:	White Research SRL
Issue date:	12/12/2025
Work package leader:	White Research SRL
Dissemination level:	PU - Public

Document History

Version	Date	Modifications made by
0.1	05/12/2025	Draft version of WR presented to pilot partners
0.2	09/01/2026	Comments by pilot partners
1.0	16/01/2026	Final version of WR to be used in co-creation workshops

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Executive Summary

The present document is developed under Horizon Europe INSPIRE project and serves as a strategic guiding document and a template for developing the operational model and membership structure of a so-called “Smart Village Lab”: a very specific form of rural hub that brings together the main actors of services delivery in rural areas to promote social inclusion by adhering to the two basic elements of “Smart Village” concept: (i) participatory approach and (ii) use of digital technologies for social innovation. The document primarily addresses the pilot partners of the INSPIRE project, who undertake the co-creation of their own Smart Village Lab together with local community members and representatives of groups in vulnerable situations in their target area. However, it is also designed in a way that can be used by pioneering actors working on social inclusion and smart development in other rural areas in Europe (and hopefully even beyond) to address their own unique challenges.

The document essentially guides the users through all the necessary elements that constitute a “Smart Village” initiative, with references to the emerging body of literature, providing instructions on how to address each building block of a Smart Village. The whole procedure unfolds collaboratively with local stakeholders: in the context of INSPIRE, collaboration refers to the co-creation workshops in the seven pilot areas of the project, but it can also take numerous other forms (e.g., village assemblies, public fora, deliberation in virtual platforms) once the document is exported to other rural contexts. The flexible nature of the guiding document resonates with the assumption that a Smart Village strategy must be territorially embedded, socio-culturally customised, and eventually, useful for the village itself. To that end, the authors of the document acknowledge that they have drawn inspiration from the template for developing a Smart Village Strategy offered by the flagship project Smart Rural 21;¹ with necessary adaptations, additions, and changes to better reflect the narrower scope of a Lab (compared to a territorially much broader Smart Village Strategy) and the specificities of the INSPIRE project: the focus on social inclusion, social services and social entrepreneurship.

Following the preamble, the document’s users can use the template embedded in each building block from Sections 2 to 5 (i.e., strategy and mission, membership structure, profile, and preliminary sustainability plan) to discuss and co-decide the unique characteristics and operating model of their own Smart Village Lab. This information is presented in a standardised form to ensure uniformity across all pilot cases of the INSPIRE project, allowing comparative analysis of the different Smart Village Labs. An epilogue concludes the document.

Eventually, the document builds on the premise that what is considered a “Smart Village” (or simply “smart”) in one locality may not be perceived as such in another one.² At the same time, this document aspires to contribute to the wider efforts put forward by the European Union and numerous other actors for the smart transformation of rural areas in the 21st century. As such, it is the intention of the document authors to offer this strategic guiding document to stakeholders and actors who work on the front of smart rural development, with the anticipation that, upon necessary adaptations, it might be useful to other rural locales and territorial realities.

¹ Smart Rural 21 (2021). “Smart Village Strategy Template”. Available at: <https://www.smartrural21.eu/roadmap-toolbox/smart-village-strategy-template/>.

² Smart Villages project (2017). “A pocket guide to rural energy & “smart villages””.

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List of Terms and Definitions

Table 1. Terms and Definitions

Abbreviation	Definition
EU	European Union
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale
SVL	Smart Village Lab

[Logo of pilot partner]

SMART VILLAGE LAB OF [NAME OF PILOT AREA]

[PHOTO OF AREA]

[DATE]

The authors would like to acknowledge that the format and structure of the document is largely inspired by the Smart Village Strategy template, offered by the flagship project Smart Rural 21, with necessary adaptations, additions, and modifications.

The opinions and views expressed in the document are those of the authors only and do not represent the European Commission's views nor the views of the Smart Village Strategy template's authors.

1. Preamble: context and purpose

1.1 The INSPIRE Smart Village Labs in the DoA

According to the Description of Action of INSPIRE project: ““Smart Village labs” are physical and virtual places that bring together the three main actors of services delivery in rural areas (i.e., private sector, public sector, and community organisations) with end-users (e.g., vulnerable groups, general public) and intermediary players (e.g., NGOs, academia) to promote social inclusion through user innovation and social entrepreneurship. They adhere to the two basic elements of “Smart Village” concept, which is a participatory approach and use of digital technologies for social innovation to enhance governance frameworks. The Labs operationalise the “Smart Village” initiative (articulated in the 2016 EU vision of “A Better Life in Rural Areas”), addressing current challenges to the initiative, such as low trust between stakeholders and low innovation capacity.”

Based on this definition, the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs are expected to be formed according to the fundamental principles of the “Smart Village” initiative, but at the same time they bring in new elements that specifically regard social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations and social entrepreneurship. These elements are considered in some of the studies and initiatives of Smart Villages in Europe but are not integral (in the same way as elements of participatory approach and use of digital technologies are). As such, the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs zoom into a currently niche aspect of the Smart Village initiative – which so far has been centred around the provision of smart services to citizens and the wide application of digital solutions – to support the development of smart solutions for enhancing social services and therefore social inclusion of people in vulnerable situations (under a participatory and technology-enabled methodology).

To properly set the foundations and design a Smart Village Lab, the components of its operational model need to be explained. Moreover, the Lab must comply with the foundational elements of any Smart Village initiative, otherwise it is reduced to a simple rural hub. The necessary components of what constitute an operational model and the foundational elements of a Smart Village initiative are briefly described below.

1.2 Components of operational model

The concept of operational, or operating, model, comes from the field of business studies. An operational model is conventionally understood as the way and processes through which an organisation, entity, or business deliver on their strategy; on, in other words, how the strategy is practically deployed to accomplish its goals.³ It covers elements of resources, management structures, capacities and activities, channels, partnerships, people, culture, and location.⁴ The design principles of an operating model are defined by the strategic priorities and the organisational assessment of the concerned entity. Even though these elements are derived from the world of

³ Dunne et al. (2020). “Aligning the operating model with your strategy”. © 2020 Roland Berger GMBH.

⁴ Bateman, N. (2017). “Operating Model: An exploration of the Concept”. Loughborough University. Centre for Service Management.

business management and entrepreneurship, they provide a useful framework to organise and determine the practical operation of the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs.

1.3 Foundational elements of a Smart Village initiative

The common starting point for listing all foundational elements of a Smart Village initiative is to consult the working definition of a Smart Village that is proposed in the Ecorys' flagship report: *"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."*⁵

According to this widely accepted definition, the two elements of a Smart Village that are considered "sine qua non" are: (i) participatory approach, and (ii) use of digital technologies (these are the two elements upon which the original definition of the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs is based). Nevertheless, studies and research on Smart Village conceptualisation and operationalisation offer additional foundational elements of a Smart Village initiative, broadening the original definition by Ecorys. Such elements are usually recurring across studies, policy reports, and papers, showcasing a growing consensus between academics, practitioners and policy makers on what are the components of a Smart Village. These elements are catalogued in Table 2.

Table 2. Integral characteristics of a Smart Village

Characteristics	Relevant studies
Open, bottom-up and participatory structures & community empowerment	Guzal-Dec (2018); Zavratnik et al. (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Juan and McEldowney (2021); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024); Renukappa et al. (2024); Makrandreou (2024).
Use of digital technologies	Guzal-Dec (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Juan and McEldowney (2021); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024); Renukappa et al. (2024).
Use of an "anchor project"	Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019).
Reliance on local strengths, opportunities and assets	Guzal-Dec (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Juan and McEldowney (2021).
Cultural and territorial embeddedness	Guzal-Dec (2018); E40 (2023); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024); Renukappa et al. (2024).
Innovative services & solutions	Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024); Makrandreou (2024).
Local leadership	Guzal-Dec (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); E40 (2023).
Multi-actor partnerships	Guzal-Dec (2018); Zavratnik et al. (2018); Juan and McEldowney (2021); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024).

⁵ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

Support from internal stakeholders	Zavratnik et al. (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Renukappa et al. (2024).
Support from external stakeholders	Zavratnik et al. (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Renukappa et al. (2024).
Gender equality	Smart Villages initiative (2017).
Long-term sustainability plan	Ecorys (2019); Juan and McEldowney (2021).
Identification of post-grant funding mechanisms	Zavratnik et al. (2018); Ecorys (2019); Smart Villages Pilot project (2019); Emerllahu and Bogataj (2024).
Complementarity with existing strategies	Visvizi et al. (2019); Juan and McEldowney (2021); Renukappa et al. (2024); Makrandreou (2024).

A Smart Village includes characteristics that go beyond participatory approaches and the application of digital technologies. To ensure that the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs adhere to all the main characteristics of a Smart Village initiative, they should address and incorporate the elements presented in Table 2. This approach ensures both intellectual grounding (i.e., connection to the existing body of literature) and practical robustness (i.e., consideration of essential logistics) of the INSPIRE Labs.

1.4 A concrete template for co-designing the Smart Village Labs

Against this background, this document serves as a strategic guide and a concrete template for co-designing the Smart Village Lab of [name of area]. The document intends to inform the points of discussion and reflection during the dedicated co-creation workshop that will be held with community members and representatives of vulnerable groups in [name of area] by [name of pilot partner].

By using this guide, the workshop organisers and participants will navigate through the various facets and integral features of a Smart Village (as elaborated in Table 2) and provide practical answers to the (i) mission, (ii) membership structure, (iii) profile, and (iv) early sustainability points of their own Lab. The guide can be used also as a template, in which workshop participants summarise and present the outcomes of the workshop discussion under each aspect of their Smart Village Lab. In this way, the profiles of the seven Smart Village Labs will be gathered in standardised format.

The guiding document and template are structured as follows:

- ❖ In Section 2, participants will discuss and identify the contextual conditions against which their Lab will be established: the concrete challenges and target groups that face social exclusion challenges, as well as the “anchor project” of the Lab that will inform the latter’s mission.
- ❖ In Section 3, participants will define the members and responsibilities of their Lab: they will identify members of target groups, local champions, and civil servants who will undertake the leading working group of the Lab; they will list internal stakeholders who are expected to join the Lab as regular members (with clear benefits and responsibilities) as well as external supporters; and they will produce an organisational chart.
- ❖ In Section 4, the profile of the Smart Village Lab will be determined: the physical dimension, entailing infrastructure and participation channels; and the digital dimension, covering the website, social media platforms, and other virtual engagement channels. A name and symbol will be selected for the Lab as part of the localisation process.

- ❖ In Section 5, preliminary considerations of post-grant sustainability of the Lab will be discussed and presented. Sustainability considerations include alignment with existing local strategic plans, potential integration in existing structures, and identification of funding sources.

2. Strategy and mission of [name of area] Smart Village Lab

2.1 Context: concrete challenges and target groups in social inclusion

2.1.1 Key local challenge(s)

The starting point for any structured endeavour in building a successful Smart Village is defining the concrete local challenges that are expected to be addressed, along with the target group(s) that will benefit from this endeavour.⁶ Targeting local challenges that impact the wellbeing of a certain or a mix of rural groups is a recurring theme in the historical development of the concept of smart development. Challenges such as rural depopulation, youth outflows, and environmental degradation have been at the core of the intelligence development discourse, out of which the Smart Villages emerge.⁷

According to Ecorys's flagship report on Smart Villages working definition, any responsible strategy of developing a Smart Village must *"respond to the challenges and needs of their territory by building on their local strengths and assets"*. The term "challenge" is fundamental in this context. Challenges may span from improving citizens' access to rural services to fostering new business opportunities and providing jobs to locals (other challenges can include the introduction of circular economy principles, climate change mitigation or adaptation, and cultural heritage valorisation).^{8,9} A challenge can be ongoing or emerging,¹⁰ and should be local in its scope, reflecting the territorial outlook of the Smart Village strategy.¹¹

Considering the plethora of challenges that a rural area may be facing, and in line with the operational scope of INSPIRE project, the challenges addressed by the local Smart Village Lab of [name of pilot area] will naturally be focused on combating one or multiple dimensions of social exclusion. The challenge(s) to be targeted are expected to fall under one or more of the four key dimensions of social exclusion in rural Europe, as defined in the INSPIRE conceptual framework:

- Economic Security & Employment (incl. Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion)
- Health & Well-being
- Living Conditions
- Social Participation and Engagement

⁶ Makrandreou M. (2024). "Smart Villages". 33rd Conference for the Development of Mountainous Areas and Left-behind areas under LEADER". DG AGRI.

⁷ Guzal-Dec, D. (2018). "Intelligent development of the countryside - the concept of smart villages: assumptions, possibilities and implementation limitations". Economic and Regional Studies, 11(30), 32-49. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ers-2018-0023>.

⁸ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

⁹ Smart Villages Pilot project (2019). "Briefing note". Brussels, 21-22 February 2019.

¹⁰ Renukappa et al. (2024). "Evaluation of smart village strategies and challenges". Smart and Sustainable Built Environment.

¹¹ Makrandreou M. (2024). "Smart Villages". 33rd Conference for the Development of Mountainous Areas and Left-behind areas under LEADER". DG AGRI.

The identification of the challenge(s) to be addressed during the workshop can be based on a combination of (i) discussing the insight and data on social exclusion that the project's teams produced during the research phase with (ii) eliciting the fresh perspectives, thoughts, and concerns of workshop participants. We argue that by compounding two distinct and complementary knowledge systems – on the one hand, scientific knowledge in the form of quantitative and qualitative datasets; on the other hand, indigenous informal knowledge of local ecosystems¹² – the Smart Village Lab will address a single or a range of challenges that are based both on scientific evidence and a deep-rooted understanding of nuanced challenges by the local community.

Box 1: Concrete local challenge(s) – indicative list of questions

Discuss with participants the key challenge(s) of the area and community in relation to social exclusion (present them in a simple and engaging way the results from research phase):

- What are the key challenges that your rural area is facing when it comes to people being or feeling excluded?
- What are the most urgent needs related to: (i) securing decent employment, (ii) accessing affordable and quality healthcare services, (iii) ensuring equal social participation of locals, and (iv) supporting decent living conditions?
- In what order would you prioritise these challenges and needs, and why?

The challenges can be listed concretely:

2.1.1.1 [Name of challenge 1]

Shortly describe the challenge as identified during the workshop.

2.1.1.2 [Name of challenge 2]

Shortly describe the challenge as identified during the workshop.

2.1.1.3 [Name of challenge 3]

Shortly describe the challenge as identified during the workshop.

Etc.

...

2.1.2 Target group(s)

When defining the key challenge(s) of the [name of area] pilot area, it is necessary to understand them in relation to certain local groups that are the most heavily impacted. The subjects of social exclusion are real-life people – yet not all segments of the population struggle equally under the most critical challenges. As villages are not made up merely by their natural assets, ecological surroundings

¹² Ijatuyi et al. (2025). "Integration of indigenous knowledge with scientific knowledge: A systematic review". Environmental Science & Policy Volume 170, August 2025, 104119. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104119>.

and physical infrastructure, placing a target group at the centre of the Smart Village Lab' strategy is foundational. The people-centred approach that we advocate for is grounded on the participatory nature of any serious Smart Village strategy, according to which one of the missions of Smart Villages is to improve the social and economic conditions of the locals.^{13,14}

In the framework of INSPIRE, building your Smart Village Lab requires the identification of one or more target groups from the area's rural communities that: (i) are disproportionately affected by or are directly related by the key challenge(s) you identified above; and (ii) are expected to play an essential role in and benefit from addressing the challenge(s).

In the research phase and the profiling exercise of the project, a range of potential target groups were identified. During the co-creation workshop, it is expected that representatives and/or members of key vulnerable groups will actively participate in the design of the Smart Village Lab. As such, it is naturally implied that the target group(s) of [name of area] Smart Village Lab will be the same with the groups of the workshop's representatives. However, deciding whether additional or other groups in vulnerable situations should be placed at the core of the local Lab's strategy is part of the co-creation workshop. Moreover, even if broader target groups have already been identified by the project's researchers (e.g., Roma people, people with disabilities, women), participants can discuss during the workshop if their Smart Village Lab needs to concentrate on sub-groups of broader segments. Examples may include the elderly of a specific rural settlement (e.g., a remote village in the mountains) or people who suffer from a certain type of mental disability.

These groups should be identified, discussed, and prioritised in relation to the key local challenge(s) to social inclusion that the Smart Village Lab is set to address for reasons of consistency of the Lab's strategy.

Box 2: Target group(s) in vulnerable situation – indicative list of questions

Discuss with participants the main groups of the area that are either particularly affected by the key local challenge(s) and/or are expected to play a key role in addressing the challenge:

- What are the main groups of the area that are particularly affected by the challenges? Which members are in a vulnerable position and remain excluded, and why?
- Are there are subgroups who are disproportionately impacted? Does gender, ethnicity, religion or age affect how much the challenge impact these groups?
- How realistic is that these groups can become active players in addressing the challenge(s) and supporting the local Lab? How would you prioritise these groups in terms of involvement potential?

The target groups can be listed concretely. For reasons of feasibility, we argue that a range of one to three target groups has to be discussed, identified, and placed in the core of the Smart Village Lab. This does not exclude the participation and support of community members who do not belong in one of these groups but are still interested in the Lab's mission and activities.

¹³ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

¹⁴ Ana Martínez Juan and James McEldowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

2.1.1.1 [Name of target group 1]

Shortly describe the target group as identified during the workshop.

2.1.1.2 [Name of target group 2]

Shortly describe the target group as identified during the workshop.

Etc.

...

2.2 Defining the “anchor project” as clear mission of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab

The next step upon discussing and defining the concrete social inclusion challenge(s) and the relevant target group(s), is to discuss and determine with workshop participants the clear mission of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab. In this context, the clear mission should take the form of a so-called “anchor project”: a small-scale project that is embedded in the pilot area, it is expected to be designed and implemented by the local target groups for the local target groups, and is geared toward a “specific, simple, and clear objective”.¹⁵ The deployment of a clear and localised project which the Smart Village will seek to deliver as response to the key challenge(s) is an integral element of any Smart Village strategy because it conveys to target groups a sense of practical purpose of the strategy; one that, if implemented successfully, can improve their everyday lives.¹⁶

During the co-creation workshop, it is not expected that the participants have the resources, time and capacity to ideate and propose a full-fledged small-scale project that can realistically address the key challenges. What is rather expected to be discussed with and determined by them is the clear mission of the Lab against the background of challenges and target groups to be assisted.

Box 3: Anchor project of the Lab – indicative list of questions

Based on the assessment of needs/challenges and core target groups, a clear mission of the Lab needs to be drawn up:

- What are the most important objectives that the Lab would like to achieve through its strategy in response to specific needs and key target groups?
- How are these objectives expected to address the stated challenges and improve the lives of key target groups? What should be the main outcome once the objectives have been fulfilled?
- How can these objectives be put together under a single, clear, and inspiring mission of the Lab? In case of more than one target groups, is one single mission enough, or should the Lab pursue multiple missions in parallel under an “umbrella-project”?

¹⁵ Smart Villages Pilot project (2019). “Briefing note”. Brussels, 21-22 February 2019.

¹⁶ Ecorys (2019). “Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages”. Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

The anchor project can be defined in a simple and clear way below. The definition can take the form of a stated mission that can be conveyed to and easily understood by community members of the rural area. Terminology and lingo must be simple, clear, and inspiring, to encourage other locals to join the initiative and contribute to fulfilling the Lab's mission.

Stated mission(s) of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab

Describe the mission(s) in one (or max. a few) paragraph – it will form the backbone of the “anchor project” that will be operationalised later under the deployed solutions:

Shortly describe the mission.

XX

XX

Once the key challenge(s) to social inclusion, the key target group(s) in vulnerable situations and state of social exclusion, and the related mission of the Smart Village Lab are discussed and defined with workshop participants, the next phase of the co-creation process is to determine the membership structure and basis of the Lab.

3. Membership structure and basis: roles and responsibilities

Simplified administrative structure and robust governance are foundational elements of a Smart Village building strategy.¹⁷ Who identifies as member of the Lab and what their responsibilities and role are inform the membership structure and the human backbone of the Lab: the people who will lead or support the accomplishment of the Lab's stated mission in a structured and consistent manner. Since the village is viewed as an organic microcosm consisting of real people and their relationships, rather than as an impersonal territorial unit, the "human being" lies in the core of the Smart Village.¹⁸

In discussing and defining the membership structure of the [name of area] Lab, two dimensions need to be considered: (i) open participation, and (ii) strong leadership. The open and democratic nature of the former should be considered complementary than conflicting with the more hierarchical implications of the latter. On the one hand, the participatory approach and the continuous and effective involvement of the rural area's residents lies in all the studies and widely accepted working definitions of Smart Villages: a Smart Village strategy that does not rely on the engagement of as many locals as possible will fail in building a critical mass and deliver poor outcomes.^{19,20,21} Throughout the journey of transforming the mission of the Lab from a statement to a practical reality, user expectations and preferences must be considered and integrated through targeted engagement.²² At the same time, strong leadership is as much critical as open participation. Numerous case studies from the Smart Village literature indicate that without the guidance of a leading working group based on personal relationships and intimate trust, a Smart Village endeavour will be reduced into an amorphous, incoherent and ineffective programme.^{23,24}

Building on these assertions, the membership structure of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab will be determined across three pillars: (i) a leading working group, (ii) the internal stakeholders, and (iii) the external stakeholders.

3.1 Leading working group

3.1.1 Pilot partner of INSPIRE

The leading working group of the Smart Village Lab will consist of a core "task force" that is expected to play the following roles: (i) act as first-line contact point of behalf of the Lab to internal and external stakeholders, (ii) spearhead activities to be implemented under the Lab, such as organisation of capacity-building workshops and organisation of user innovation workshops, and (iii) lead any plans for the long-term sustainability of the Lab and its integration into wider initiatives in the area related to

¹⁷ Smart Villages Pilot project (2019). "Briefing note". Brussels, 21-22 February 2019.

¹⁸ Visvizi et al. (2019). "Smart villages in the EU and beyond". Emerald Publishing Limited. ISBN: 978-1-78769-845-1.

¹⁹ Ana Martinez Juan and James McElDowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

²⁰ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

²¹ Makrandreou M. (2024). "Smart Villages". 33rd Conference for the Development of Mountainous Areas and Left-behind areas under LEADER". DG AGRI.

²² E40 (2023). "Preparatory Action – Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century". doi: 10.2762/72489.

²³ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

²⁴ E40 (2023). "Preparatory Action – Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century". doi: 10.2762/72489.

local development and social wellbeing. Gender equality in the working group must be respected as a building block of a Smart Village.²⁵

The INSPIRE's project pilot partner will be one of the three entities that will form the leading working group of the Lab. During the workshop, the pilot partner will determine the people from the pilot partner who will be assigned to chair the working group of the Lab. A main contact person must be appointed for contact-related and organisational matters, whereas supportive team members will be selected. This information can be presented in a structured way below and later can be presented on the dissemination and contact channels of the Lab (e.g., micro-site, social media accounts).

The chart below presents visually the team members of the pilot partner who will participate in the working group of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab.

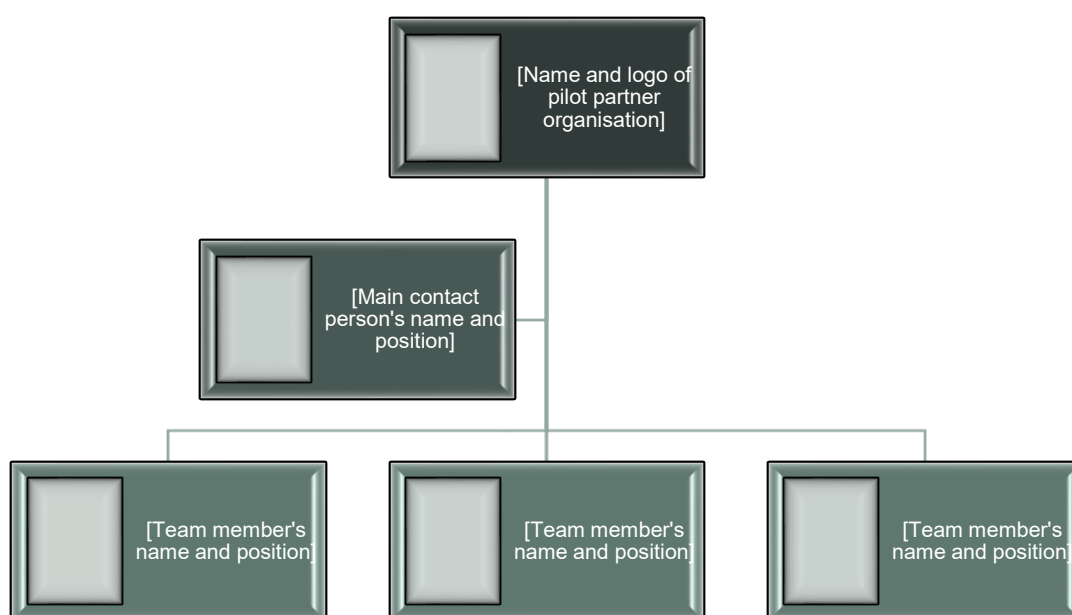


Figure 1. Team members of pilot partner in the working group of SVL

3.1.2 Representatives & members of target group(s)

In line with the user-driven logic of the Smart Village Lab, a selected number of representatives or members of the key target groups are expected to join the leading working group. Contrary to the pilot partner of Lab, whose members might be physically distanced from the Lab's premises, members or representatives of target groups are people from the pilot rural area, living there or having strong social connections with the rural communities. As such, their personal stakes over the Lab's mission will be high: these are the people who are affected by the key challenges of social exclusion and will therefore benefit substantially from the successful implementation of the Lab's activities.

In the same vein, the participation of members and representatives of target groups in the Lab's leading working group will ensure transparency and social fairness in the design and implementation of foreseen activities to fulfil the Lab's mission, whereas it will also strike a balance between groups in vulnerable situation and Lab's members who are considered to be socially or economically more

²⁵ Smart Villages project (2017). "A pocket guide to rural energy & "smart villages"".

privileged. In this respect, recruiting selected members and representatives of target groups in the Lab's leading working group will serve as power balance mechanism, and subsequently, as a community empowerment tool (a major feature of Smart Village initiatives).²⁶

During the recruitment of these people into the leading working group, emphasis should be placed on incentives and benefits rather than obligations and commitments (which formally will not exist due to the open and voluntary membership structure of the Lab). During the co-creation workshop, these incentives and benefits must be communicated to participants:

- ❖ Promotion of the needs of their target group.
- ❖ Contribution to the organisation of the consultation workshops.
- ❖ Deliberation on deployed solutions to be funded and implemented.
- ❖ Access to and networking with key external stakeholders of the Lab.
- ❖ You can add any other incentive/benefit according to the local context of the Lab.
- ❖ XX.

Box 4: Forming the leading working group with members of target groups – indicative list of questions

- Are there prominent figures from the Lab's key target groups that can be invited to the leading working group?
- What is the optimal number of people from target groups to join the leading working group, considering feasibility, retainment and operational scope?
- What is considered rational contribution from these members, considering their everyday limitations and personal aspirations in supporting their group's peers?

The chart below presents visually the representatives and/or members of the target group(s) who will participate in the working group of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab. [You can duplicate the figure to accommodate all target groups of the Lab or add more blocks to present the people within the same target group.]

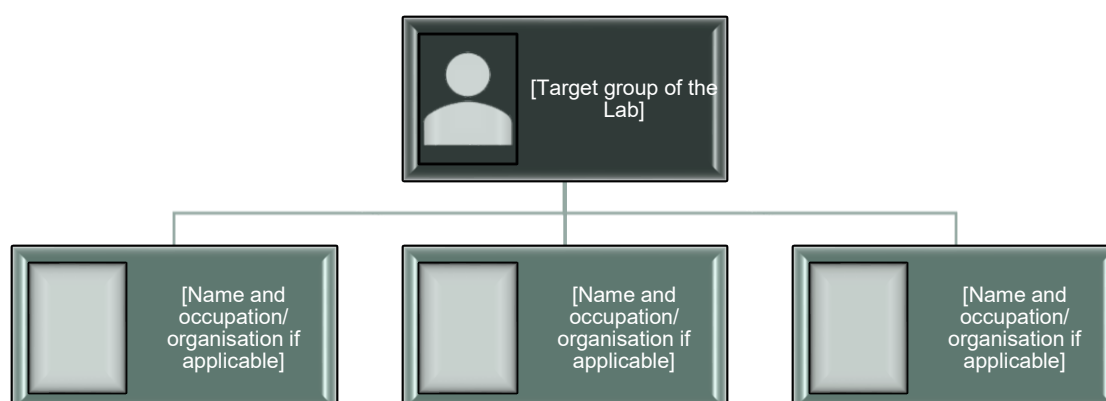


Figure 2. Representatives & members of target group in the working group of SVL

²⁶ Visar Emerllahu and David Bogataj (2024). "Smart Villages as infrastructure of rural areas: Literature review and research agenda". IFAC-PapersOnLine Volume 58, Issue 3, 2024, Pages 268-273.

3.1.3 Local civil servants and local community champion(s)

In the literature of Smart Villages, it is consistently stressed that the active involvement of “trusted elected leaders through visionary local individuals or NGOs self-organised community groups” is a major enabler of the initiative’s success and impact.²⁷ As important is the participatory and bottom-up approach of a Smart Village strategy, equally significant is the concept of leadership. Influential local entities and community leaders with certain bargaining power can activate and mobilise the area’s target groups and end users, giving birth to the Lab and increasing the chances of impactful change.²⁸

In the framework of building the [name of area] Smart Village Lab, the concept of leadership actualises through the participation of one or more local champions or influential local figures in the leading working group of the Lab. In line with existing strategies and studies on Smart Villages, these leading figures should come from either the local public authorities (i.e., being a local civil servant, such as a mayor or an employee in municipal authorities) or from the local civil society (i.e., being a renowned community champion, a civic activist, or an entrepreneur with a socially responsible mindset embedded in the local ecosystem).²⁹ As in the case of members of target groups, these people are physically located and/or emotionally intrinsic to the local area and its members and have a professional and personal track record in supporting their communities. Therefore, they can decisively act as vanguard force in setting the example for fellow citizens and inspiring locals to support the Lab’s mission; even at the symbolic level.

Box 5: Forming the leading working group with local champions – indicative list of questions

- Which are the main local entities from public authorities or civil society that can influence or impact the success of a local project in the area?
- Are there prominent figures from these entities who might be willing, committed and eager to join the leading working group? Would it be out of personal or professional aspirations?
- What could their role and contribution be to the Lab’s mission?

The chart below presents the local champions and prominent figures who will participate in the working group. [Duplicate the figure to accommodate different entities, if applicable.]

²⁷ E40 (2023). “Preparatory Action – Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century”. doi: 10.2762/72489.

²⁸ Guzal-Dec, D. (2018). “Intelligent development of the countryside - the concept of smart villages: assumptions, possibilities and implementation limitations”. Economic and Regional Studies, 11(30), 32-49. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ers-2018-0023>.

²⁹ Ecorys (2019). “Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages”. Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

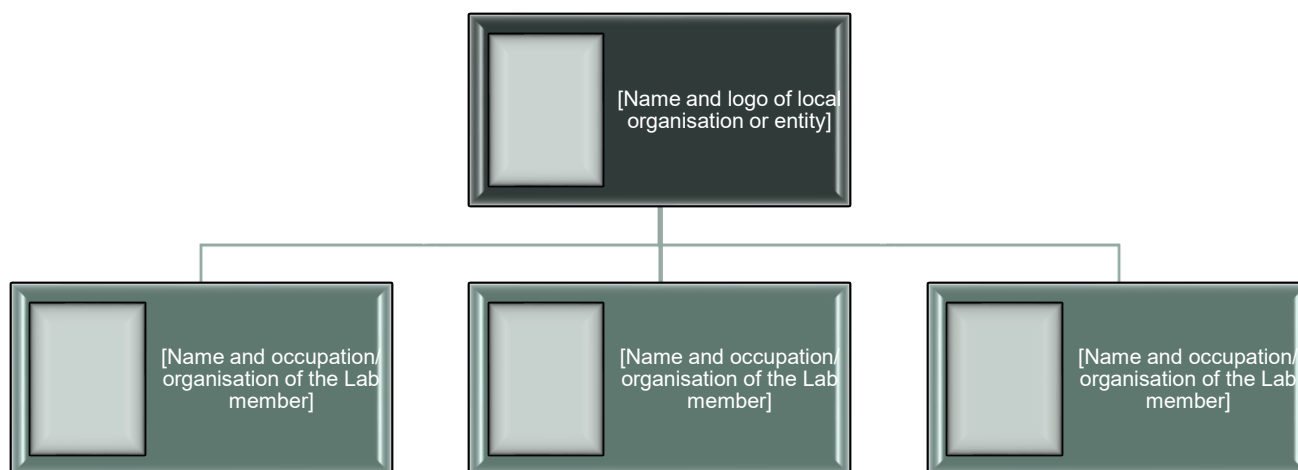


Figure 3. Local key actors in the working group of SVL

3.2 Internal stakeholders: members of the Lab

Once the leading working group of the Lab is consolidated, the human basis needs to be discussed. We argue that two layers of Lab participants can be discerned: (i) regular members of the Lab (internal stakeholders), and (ii) supporters of the Lab (external stakeholders).

3.2.1 Defining the local stakeholders of the area

Creating a formal membership structure, even on a pro-bono basis, is important both practically and psychologically, since it instills to the Lab members a sense of commitment to local mission. Since the very concept of Smart Villages is linked to bottom-up participation of a village's residents for improving their socioeconomic and environmental wellbeing,³⁰ participation needs to be delineated and formalised through a form of membership.

The first step in building the membership procedures and basis is to discuss with the workshop participants the local stakeholder groups of the area from which rural dwellers can be potentially recruited. According to the Ecorys flagship report and the Smart Village Pilot Project findings, endorsement of the Smart Village initiative from internal stakeholders is required. Stakeholder groups can vary according to the initiative's scope, the population's structure, and the broader ecosystem, ranging from research entities (e.g., local university) to civic and business associations.^{31,32} In the context of INSPIRE, these stakeholder groups should be directly relevant to the Lab's mission, key challenges and target groups identified above (it is expected that target groups in vulnerable situations are one of the main stakeholder groups from which Lab members can be retrieved).

When discussing the internal stakeholder groups with workshops participants, presenting findings from the pilot ecosystem profiling exercise will facilitate the conversation. A list of stakeholder groups relevant to local social services, social enterprises, and public authorities has already been drawn for

³⁰ Ana Martinez Juan and James McEldowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

³¹ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

³² Smart Villages Pilot project (2019). "Briefing note". Brussels, 21-22 February 2019.

the pilot ecosystem, on which workshops participants can reflect and discuss for modifications and expansion.

Box 6: Internal stakeholder groups for Lab members – indicative list of questions

- Which are the main stakeholder groups / ‘enablers’ in the area – such as social service providers, local councils, civil associations – that can support the mission of the Smart Village Lab?
- Are there individuals apart from groups who can be considered stakeholders? What is the gender and age structure of these stakeholders?
- What could their role and contribution be to the Lab’s mission as regular members?

Members of the Lab do not have to necessarily belong to one of the internal stakeholder groups identified above. Lab members can come from the local population of the rural area: i.e., citizens who are not affiliated to a service provider or a civil organisation or have not any track record of (local) civic activism.

3.2.2 Discussing membership: procedure and benefits

Offering a clear membership structure to targeted internal stakeholders and the local population is imperative for clarifying expectations from and benefits to the Lab members. As in any case of voluntary engagement, incentives for motivation, enthusiasm and retainment need to be given.³³ Any type of participation that relies solely on the intrinsic motivation (e.g., personal interest, emotional attachment to the mission) of Lab members will be limited in the boundaries of a small group of hardcore followers without engulfing broader segments of local population. As such, contemplating and carefully crafting a list of realistic and appealing incentives to recruit prospective Lab members will be determinant to the Lab’s capacity to expand its human basis. At the same time, despite the voluntary nature of membership, some expectations regarding the members’ basic contribution need to be laid down to convey the gravity of the initiative and activate a sense of responsibility toward the Lab’s mission.

Box 7: Lab membership – indicative list of questions

- What is the minimum number of regular members that the Lab can realistically achieve?
- How should membership be defined? Will there be any established procedure (e.g., subscription to an internal repository) for becoming a member? How formal should the process be (e.g., will the member get a virtual membership card)?
- What benefits can be offered as incentives to prospective members? Think of non-monetary incentives that will be appreciated by targeted stakeholder groups.
- What should be expected in terms of contribution from prospective members? How can contribution be framed in an engaging and inspiring way, so that Lab members will feel eager to participate (even under a scenario of low-intensity participation)?

³³ Gordienko, Y. G. (2013). “Green Paper on Citizen Science. Towards a better society of empowered citizens and enhanced research”. SOCIENTIZE EU Project.

The internal stakeholders (groups or individuals) can be listed concretely:

3.2.2.1 [Name of group /individual 1]

Shortly describe the stakeholder as identified during the workshop.

3.2.2.2 [Name of group/individual 2]

Shortly describe the stakeholder as identified during the workshop.

3.2.2.3 [Name of group/individual 3]

Shortly describe the stakeholder as identified during the workshop.

Etc.

...

The templates below are intended to help workshop participants structure, present, and order the benefits and expected contribution of Lab members. Priority should be given to benefits and incentives. Some indicative benefits and expected contributions are pre-given in the template as basis for discussion. These are generic benefits and contributions that are applicable in all pilot cases.

Benefits

- Accreditation scheme (e.g., certificate) of Lab membership by the project.
- Creating new professional contact points with local enterprises and public authorities.
- Access to Lab meetings (e.g., consultation workshops) and voting rights in mini fora.
- Increased capacity to fund a prospective project under funding for social service solutions.
- Access to a wider network of organisations across Europe (e.g., INSPIRE partnership, Network of Interest, sister projects).
- You can provide additional benefits as incentives.
- Etc.

Contribution

- Participation to at least one of the upcoming workshops of the Lab (e.g., capacity-building workshop, consultation workshop, sustainability workshop).
- Subscription to the social media channels of the Lab (e.g., LinkedIn page, Instagram/Facebook account, newsletter).
- Participation to the testing of local social service to be deployed under the small-scale project in the area.
- You can provide additional contributions.
- Etc.

Figure 4. Benefits and contribution of Lab members

3.3 External supporters

Support from external stakeholders is recurring across studies on Smart Villages. Contrary to the geographically delineated, and thus easier to locate and catalogue, internal stakeholders, the pool of external stakeholders can be significantly larger and scattered. According to the literature, indicative types of external stakeholders of a Smart Village initiative include the private sector (at the regional or national level), actors from urban centres (e.g., city authorities, big associations, universities), and even other villages with their communities.³⁴ These actors are not expected to be directly involved in the implementation of the Smart Village strategy, but their soft support can be shown in other ways: exchange of good practices between village authorities; targeted visits of urban experts to the pilot area for guidance and mentorship; long-term investments from city-based companies in the village; ideas on how digital solutions can be transferred from the city to the village; and joint research between big universities and rural actors on community needs. Consequently, mapping and linking some of these actors to the Smart Village Lab of [name of area] can foster the long-term sustainability of the Lab and ensure that the latter can even become a platform for organic urban-rural unity rather than remaining a rural entity dislocated from urban realities (eventually contributing to addressing urgent rural challenges, such as outmigration and brain-drain).

When identifying and discussing the external stakeholder groups with workshops participants, their potential role of these external supports in the context of the Lab needs to be examined. Instead of drawing an endless list of organisations and actors, attention should be placed on the ones that can somehow contribute to one or more of the Smart Village Lab's activities. During this process, it is highly recommended that the pilot partner and the workshop participants explore together Lighthouse examples of existing Smart Villages offered in the Smart Rural 21 and the Smart Rural 27 platform. Lighthouse examples refer to other rural communities across Europe that have succeeded in articulating their own Smart Village strategy and delivering a set of smart interventions during the past years. Even though some of these communities are in other regions or even countries, workshop participants may find commonalities in challenges, governance structures, and main groups, thus being able to draw inspiration from lighthouse examples.

- ❖ Smart Village initiatives are found in: <https://www.smartrural21.eu/villages/>
- ❖ Lighthouse examples are found in: <https://www.smartrural27.eu/lighthouse-communities/>

Box 8: External stakeholder groups – indicative list of questions

- Which are the main external stakeholders – from nearby villagers, town or cities – that can support the mission of the Smart Village Lab? Which of them might have an interest in the Lab's activities?
- In what aspects or activities of the Lab can external stakeholders realistically and meaningful contribute? How can their support be formalised (e.g., granting to the name a distinct membership type)?

³⁴ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

The template below is intended to help workshop participants identify and prioritise potential external supporters and their expected role in the Lab's activities. Examples regarding their potential role are the following: participation in business incubation activities as urban experts; promotion of [name of area] Smart Village Lab through social media channels; exchange of good practices through dedicated digital forum; participation in sustainability workshops for the future of the Lab.

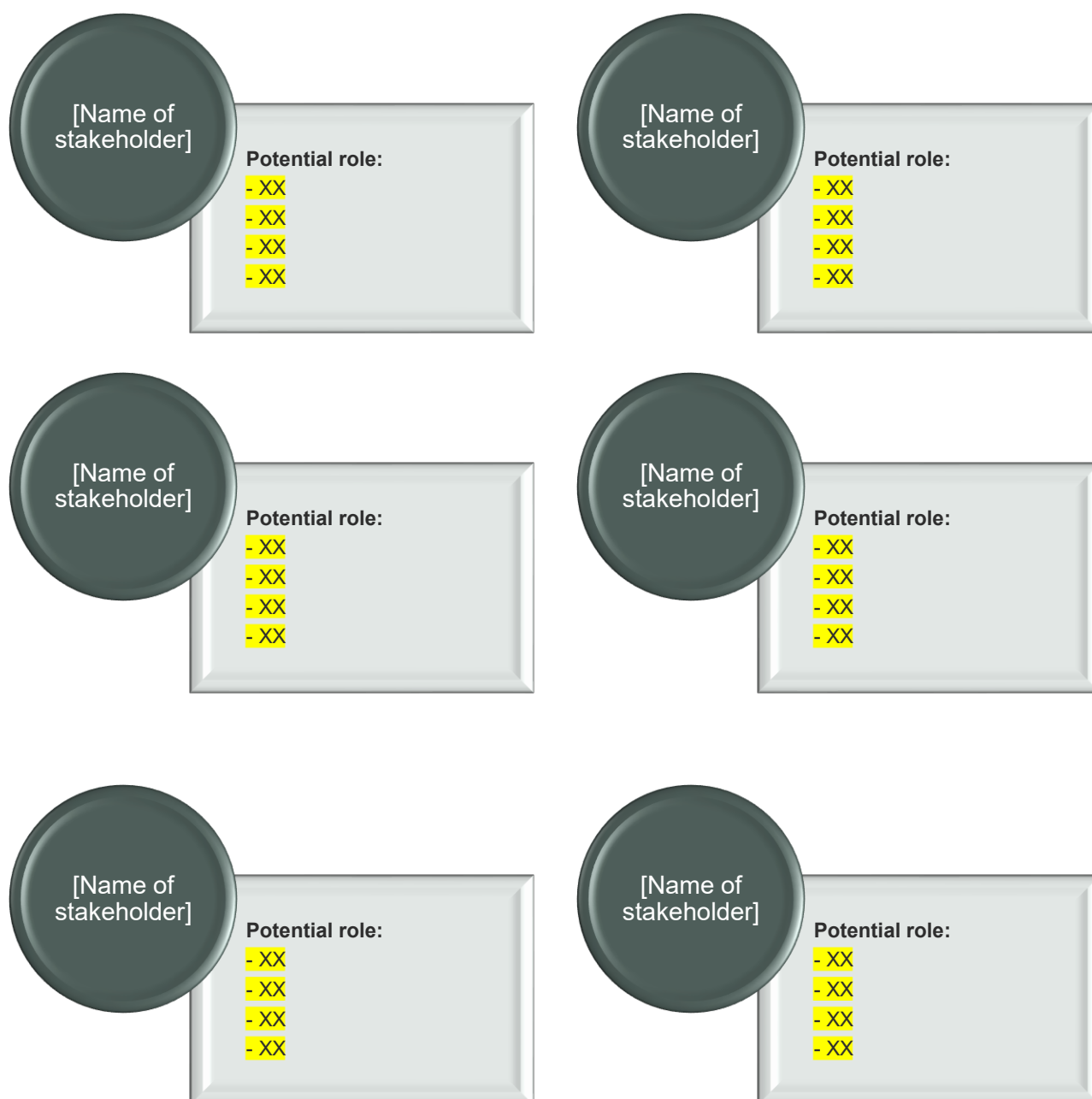


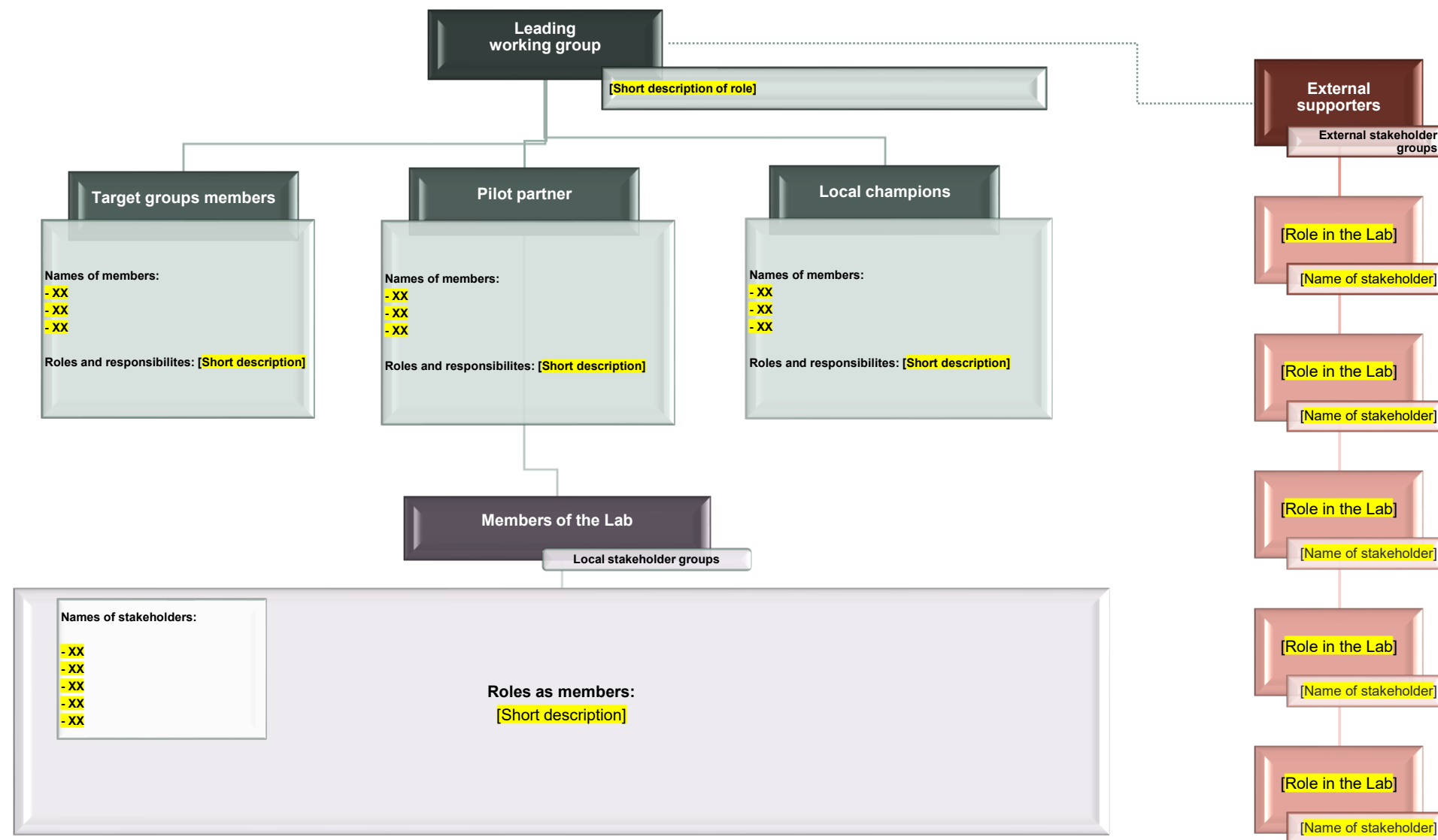
Figure 5. Names and roles of external stakeholders of the Lab

3.4 Organisational chart

As soon as the membership structure and stakeholders' roles are consolidated, the final step is to organise with workshop participants the information through an organisational chart. The chart will help visualise the membership structure of the Smart Village Lab and set the foundations for the operational model of the Lab: how each actor takes over specific activities, which collectively achieve the mission of the Lab and generate value to the target groups.

The figure template below is a tool to create the organisational chart in a structured and transparent way, defining the membership structure of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab.

Figure 6. Organisational chart of [name of area] Smart Village Lab:



4. Profile of the Smart Village Lab

4.1 Physical dimension

4.1.1 Infrastructure

In the wider literature of rural hubs and labs, the dimension of spatiality is central. Considerations of the rural space, locality, and physical connectivity, converge into the argument that combining people with places is vital in any rural hub initiative.³⁵ Ensuring the physical connectivity of Lab members is related to the area-based approach of rural development, long advocated by the LEADER approach.³⁶

In the case of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab, the physical dimension of the Lab implies the existence of certain premises, ideally located in the spatial core of the operational area of the Lab (e.g., in a certain village, town or rural settlement). The purpose of physical premises is to (i) facilitate physical connections between the Lab leading working group, the Lab members, external supporters, and the wider community, and (ii) host a series of flagship activities under the Lab (e.g., user innovation workshops, capacity building workshops, sustainability workshops).

Defining the physical premises of the [name of area] Smart Village Lab is an important step of the co-creation process. The Lab can either be hosted in a currently underutilised physical space premise (e.g., leasing an empty space) or for reasons of resource efficiency, operational infrastructures of local organisations may be used (e.g., public institutions, community-owned spaces) in agreement with the responsible entity.

Except for the Lab's physical location, other practical considerations related to the equipment of the Lab (e.g., boards, digital devices) and accessibility issues, especially for people with disabilities, need to be discussed and addressed. Inclusiveness is a core concept in the Smart Village discourse and reflects the ideal that all members of the rural community should be able to physically engage with the initiative's actors.³⁷

Box 9: Physical premises – indicative list of questions

- Which is the optimal area (e.g., village, town, peri-urban neighbourhood) for the Lab's physical location, considering that in this area as many people from the target groups as possible should access the Lab?
- Are there active local entities in this area which can potentially provide space from their own physical infrastructure for operating the Lab?
- What type of equipment will be needed for the Lab's activities? Is there available equipment already in place?

³⁵ Goodwin-Hawkins et al. (2023). "Startup Village Conceptualisation". Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2023, doi:10.2760/998554, JRC132646.

³⁶ Ana Martínez Juan and James McElowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

³⁷ Guzal-Dec, D. (2018). "Intelligent development of the countryside - the concept of smart villages: assumptions, possibilities and implementation limitations". Economic and Regional Studies, 11(30), 32-49. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ers-2018-0023>.

The participation channels can be listed concretely:

4.1.2.1 [Participation channel 1]

Shortly describe the channel, who will be engaged through it, and who will manage the channel.

4.1.2.2 [Participation channel 2]

Shortly describe the channel, who will be engaged through it, and who will manage the channel.

4.1.2.3 [Participation channel 3]

Shortly describe the channel, who will be engaged through it, and who will manage the channel.

Etc.

...

4.2 Digital outlook

4.2.1 Website

The use of digital means is consistently present in all the studies on Smart Villages.³⁹ If according to the widely accepted definition of Smart Village, participatory approach is the first fundamental element of a Smart Village, the deployment of digital solutions is the second one. Smart Villages are supposed to leverage digital technologies to devise and implement smart solutions.⁴⁰ There is no strict interpretation of what digital technologies should be used. Digital means can vary from simple training on digital literacy and introduction of broadband, to more advanced application of information and communication technologies or solutions based on the Internet of Things.^{41,42}

It is important to stress that in some Smart Village cases, digital solutions constitute simply a means rather than the end of the initiative. Digitising services or increasing the digital literacy levels of locals can serve a broader purpose – instead of being themselves the core objective in first place – such as rendering healthcare services more accessible. In the pilot project of smart eco-social villages, it is interesting to note that out of the 15 cases studied in total, six of them deployed digital tools as an instrument to accomplish a higher end, whereas in most of the cases conventional digital tools were used (e.g., a website or a social media page). Consequently, the use and expansion of digital technologies can be both a result and a requirement for a Smart Village initiative.⁴³ This allows for flexibility in deciding which digital tools should be used, at what intensity, and for which purpose.

According to the INSPIRE Description of Action, the [name of area] Smart Village Lab must have a digital dimension, with a website and presence in social media. Starting with the Lab's website, there

³⁹ Ana Martinez Juan and James McElDowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

⁴⁰ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

⁴¹ Ana Martinez Juan and James McElDowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

⁴² Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

⁴³ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

is a number of options available: from standalone webpage to microsite that functions within an existing website.

Box 11: Website – indicative list of questions

- How should the website of the Lab be? In case of micro-site, what should be the existing website within which it will function (e.g., pilot project's website, INSPIRE project website, another website)?
- Who should be responsible for managing the website (e.g., content update)?
- What information needs to be presented on the website? Who will be responsible for developing the content?
- What other considerations need to be discussed (e.g., brand identity)?

4.2.2 Social media platform(s)

The social media presence is expected to support the website and enhance visibility of the Lab by taking advantage of the ever-expanding nature of social media channels. When discussing the optimal social media channel(s) of the Lab, participants need to concentrate on the expected local impact of the channel instead of how widespread the channel is at the global level. For instance, Instagram might be much the most popular channel at the national level in [name of area], but Facebook might be used more by locals of the [name of area]. Moreover, depending on age, gender, or other factors (e.g., ethnic minorities), more than one social media channel should be used by the Lab.

Box 12: Social media presence – indicative list of questions

- What are the most popular social media channels in the area? Are certain channels used more by the main target groups of the Lab?
- Should more than one channels be used to maximised outreach?
- Who should be responsible for managing the channels (e.g., content update)?

4.2.3 Other virtual engagement tools

Finally, additional virtual engagement tools might be proposed by the workshop participants, depending on the target groups and the mission of the Lab. These tools are expected to be auxiliary and address specific stakeholders, such as a LinkedIn forum or a group in a Zoom platform (e.g., dedicated, for example, to social entrepreneurs).

Box 13: Other channels – indicative list of questions

- Are additional virtual engagement tools needed?
- Which target groups should these tools serve?

At the end of the discussion, the digital presence can be defined in a simple and clear way below.

Digital presence of [name of area] Smart Village Lab

Describe the type of website, social media channels, and any other virtual engagement channels in one (or max. a few) paragraph. Make sure that there is clarity regarding the content and target audience, as well as who will be responsible for managing the channels:

Shortly describe the digital presence.

XX

XX

4.3 Localising the Smart Village Lab

4.3.1 Name of the Lab

The final step in the co-creation of the [name of area] Lab regards the symbolic customisation of its profile. In the Smart Villages studies, the spatial embeddedness of a Smart Village initiative is a consistent theme. It is not just about use of digital technologies and community participation; a Smart Village initiative must be grounded in the endogenous resources, the local identity and the cultural context.⁴⁴ Alignment with the sociocultural landscape matters as much as technoeconomic and ecological considerations.⁴⁵

At the symbolic level, the manifestation of territorial embeddedness can be achieved through the selection of a unique name of the Lab. Choosing a name serves both a practical and a psychological reason. From a practical viewpoint, the term “Smart Village Lab” denotes the linkage between the [name of area] Lab and the sister rural Labs from the other pilot ecosystems under the INSPIRE grant umbrella and certainly underlines that this Lab is inspired from and based on the broader literature and existing initiatives of Smart Villages across Europe. Nevertheless, the INSPIRE grant will be completed at some point, and the [name of area] Lab will have to evolve into an autonomous, standalone entity by that point, to be able to continue operating locally without the necessary support from EU funds. Therefore, even though the term “Smart Village Lab” should be used to signify the academic and policy genealogical connections of the Lab, a unique, local name will facilitate the Lab’s road toward independent functioning after the grant is over.

From a psychological viewpoint, assigning a local name to the [name of area] Lab – to be selected by the workshop participants – helps locals from the targeted villages to profoundly relate to the initiative. In certain rural realities, the words “smart” or “lab” do not provoke any feeling of excitement or enthusiasm, or, even worse, run the risk of causing complete confusion and disengagement from locals. As such, a name that responds to the cultural and social background of the ecosystem has higher chances to effectively rally citizens and convey the mission of the Lab to wider audiences.

Box 14: Name of the Lab – indicative list of questions

⁴⁴ Guzal-Dec, D. (2018). “Intelligent development of the countryside - the concept of smart villages: assumptions, possibilities and implementation limitations”. *Economic and Regional Studies*, 11(30), 32-49. <https://doi.org/10.2478/ers-2018-0023>.

⁴⁵ Visar Emerllahu and David Bogataj (2024). “Smart Villages as infrastructure of rural areas: Literature review and research agenda”. *IFAC-PapersOnLine* Volume 58, Issue 3, 2024, Pages 268-273.

- Do you prefer a catchy name that excites the locals' imagination, or a straightforward name that self-describes the Lab's objective?
- Are the names of existing local initiatives in relevant social services or organisations to which the Lab's mission will be related?

You can present below the name of the Lab and the rationale behind the selection:

Name of [name of area] Smart Village Lab

Present the name and the reason you chose it.

4.3.2 Symbol of the Lab

The final touch in the territorial customisation of the Lab is the introduction and consistent use of a logo or a symbol that will seal its identity and render the Lab unique compared to the rest of countless rural hubs, labs, platforms and initiatives across Europe. Assigning a symbol does not merely accompany the Lab's name and encourages locals to embrace the initiative as their own; symbols are deeply rooted in European rural tradition, from culinary heritage to agricultural landscape, bridging mythological narratives from the past to modern accounts of long-standing communities.⁴⁶

In this respect, the symbol (or logo) will fulfill the dual role of diversifying the Lab and communicating the Lab's mission to the target audience. The symbol can be used in dissemination activities linked to the Lab (e.g., social media presence, printed local leaflets that promote the deployment of pilot social services), and will become part of the Lab's distinct identity.

Box 15: Symbol of the Lab – indicative list of questions

- Are there local symbols related to the sociocultural history of the area that can be adapted to create the Lab's logo?
- In case you believe that a local symbol will confuse the target audience, what type of logo can properly accompany the Lab's identity and convey its central mission?
- Are there specific colours that you would like to use for the symbol?

In case workshop participants can already provide a symbol (even in a draft, simple version) by the end of the co-creation exercise, this symbol can be presented below:

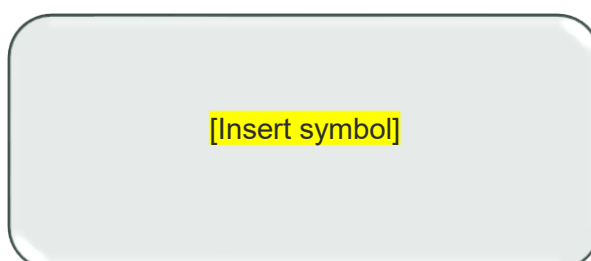


Figure 8. Symbol of the Smart Village Lab

⁴⁶ Hernik et al. (2021). "Indicators of change in cultural heritage". Monograph. Copyright © Publishing House of the University of Agriculture in Krakow, 2021. ISBN 978-83-66602-15-1.

5. Preliminary sustainability plan for the [name of area] Smart Village Lab

According to the policy report for the European Parliamentary Research Service, an integrated and long-term sustainability plan is one of the pivotal elements that constitute a Smart Village initiative.⁴⁷ Sustainability in this context usually connotes the need of identifying and securing additional funding sources, through which the initiators of the Smart Village will have the resources to fuel the activities of the Smart Village for the years to come.⁴⁸ At this stage, with the Smart Village Lab of [name of area] in its inception, no credible and full-blown plan that foresees clear mechanisms for the Lab's sustainability can possibly be proposed. However, with a set of core stakeholders and a clear mission in place, early considerations about the post-INSPIRE future of the Lab can be touched upon, forming the seminal elements of a fully-fledged sustainability strategy to be developed later.

5.1 Alignment with local strategic plans

Normally, a Smart Village initiative will complement local development strategies that already exist at local (e.g., municipal) or regional level. The intention of a Smart Village is not to replace current policy interventions or developmental strategies but act synergistically with them.⁴⁹⁵⁰ Therefore, the Smart Village Lab of [name of area] needs to foresee how it will coexist with territorial development plans in the area. The principle of “complementarity” is a key dimension in the sustainability of the Lab.⁵¹

Complementarity signifies a holistic approach to the impact of the Smart Village Lab. Even though the focal point of the [name of area] Lab is addressing specific social inclusion issues that certain groups in vulnerable situations face, the workshop participants can already propose their ideas on how the Lab's activities may be inspired from or benefit other local actions in the area; depending on the intervention domain of the Lab (e.g., education, healthcare, employment, agriculture, energy, housing). Smart Village initiatives can be quite versatile regarding the dimensions of rural development they set to address, ranging from smart energy and mobility to smart agriculture and healthcare services.⁵² As such, points of convergence between the Lab's mission and flagship local strategies in the wider area need to be considered for impact maximisation.

Box 16: Alignment with local strategic plans – indicative list of questions

- What are the most important strategic plans on rural development with a social dimension in the area?
- How is the Lab's mission related to these plans? What are the main points of convergence?

⁴⁷ Ana Martinez Juan and James McEldowney (2021). “Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas”. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

⁴⁸ Smart Villages Pilot project (2019). “Briefing note”. Brussels, 21-22 February 2019.

⁴⁹ Renukappa et al. (2024). “Evaluation of smart village strategies and challenges”. Smart and Sustainable Built Environment.

⁵⁰ Ana Martinez Juan and James McEldowney (2021). “Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas”. EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

⁵¹ Visvizi et al. (2019). “Smart villages in the EU and beyond”. Emerald Publishing Limited. ISBN: 978-1-78769-845-1.

⁵² Renukappa et al. (2024). “Evaluation of smart village strategies and challenges”. Smart and Sustainable Built Environment.

- Who are the main actors behind the existing strategies that need to be informed about the Lab? How can they be engaged during the Lab's upcoming activities?

You can present below any local strategies that the Lab can complement:

Alignment with local strategic plans

- ❖ Mention any relevant local strategic plan(s).
- ❖ Briefly describe potential points of convergence.
- ❖ Mention how key actors of these plans can be engaged with.

5.2 Long-term integration in existing structures

Apart from supportive policy conditions (which can be actualised through synergies with existing strategies), a successful Smart Village initiative relies on effective public-private-community partnerships.⁵³ The involvement of key stakeholders from local authorities or pioneering community organisations is already covered in the membership structure of the Lab; in this section, the key issue is how the Lab can survive in the post-project phase through potential integration in existing structures of the area related to social services, social entrepreneurship, or local development in the broader sense. Integration can take many forms, such as: sharing of intelligence between Lab actors and local authorities; integration of Lab's digital tools into digital platforms of local authorities; transforming the Lab into a permanent service by the municipality or commune; and coordination between public services and Lab's services for integrated planning.

Box 17: Integration in existing structures – indicative list of questions

- Which are the services or structures (e.g., municipal departments, Local Action Groups) most relevant to the Lab's mission in the area?
- What would be the ideal integration scenario in such structures for the Lab?

You can present below existing (social) services and structures of local authorities or civil organisations which the Lab can potentially be integrated into in the long term:

5.2.1 [Existing structure 1]

Shortly describe the service or structure.

5.2.2 [Existing structure 2]

Shortly describe the service or structure.

Etc.

⁵³ Zavrtnik et al. (2018). "Smart Villages: Comprehensive Review of Initiatives and Practices". Sustainability 2018, 10, 2559; doi:10.3390/su10072559.

5.3 Post-grant funding sources

The final aspect to be discussed with the workshop participants as part of the preliminary sustainability plan refers to potential funding sources and channels that will keep the Lab's infrastructure and ongoing activities alive after the grant has ended. The identification of post-grant funding mechanisms is directly linked to the sustainability of a Smart Village initiative, as available budgets determine the scope and longevity of activities.^{54,55}

Having a robust sustainability plan that foresees the formal integration of the Lab into existing administrative structures or services provided by key players in the area can largely address the post-grant funding issue – since in this case, the Lab's activities can be budgeted under the core entity (e.g., a social enterprise, the municipality, the regional authority) that will take over the Lab's services in the long run. Nonetheless, in case the Lab of [name of area] decides to continue its operation and services autonomously as an independent entity, the Lab's actors and managers will need to consider sources through which financial resources will be secured. Preliminary thoughts on this front can conclude the workshop.

Box 18: Post-grant funding sources – indicative list of questions

- Would you consider funding sources from the public (e.g., regional subsidies) or private sector (e.g., business angels, venture investors)? Which seems the most viable option in the long run?
- Are there additional funding sources that you would consider, such as crowdfunding mechanisms or funds from EU grants?

You can present below a preliminary list of potential funding sources:

- ❖ [Funding source 1]
- ❖ [Funding source 2]
- ❖ XX

⁵⁴ Ecorys (2019). "Pilot project: Smart eco-social villages". Ecorys Final Report, European Commission. Doi 10.2762/100370.

⁵⁵ Ana Martínez Juan and James McElDowney (2021). "Smart villages: Concept, issues and prospects for EU rural areas". EPRS | European Parliamentary Research Service.

6. Epilogue

This strategic guiding document and template is set to support the pilot partners of the INSPIRE project to co-create seven (7) Smart Village Labs, by addressing fundamental elements that constitute the baseline operational model and membership structure of their Lab. Drawing inspiration upon the emerging literature on Smart Villages, as well as from existing initiatives across Europe (e.g., Smart Rural 21, Smart Rural 27) and globally (e.g., Pocket Guide on Smart Villages), the document builds on the premise that what is considered a “Smart Village” (or simply “smart”) in one locality may be less important (either too advanced or already conquered) in another one.⁵⁶ It is therefore imperative that the INSPIRE Smart Village Labs are co-defined with representatives of the local communities. Through interaction and debate with locals, the pilot partners of INSPIRE will eventually deliver 7 Labs that are highly customised to territorial specificities, yet at the same time display all the necessary ingredients and functions that can classify them under the big family of “Smart Villages”.

At the same time, this document aspires to contribute to the wider efforts put forward by the European Union and numerous national and sub-national actors for the smart transformation of rural areas in the 21st century. As such, it is the intention of the document authors to offer this strategic guiding document to stakeholders and actors who work on the front of smart rural development, with the anticipation that, upon necessary adaptations, it might be useful to other rural locales and territorial realities.

⁵⁶ Smart Villages project (2017). “A pocket guide to rural energy & “smart villages””.

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