



SMART VILLAGES

BLED DECLARATION

for a Smarter Future of the Rural Areas in EU,

having regard to the conclusions of the meeting at Bled, Slovenia on 13 April 2018, and previous declarations, such as the Cork 2.0 declaration.

The undersigning initiators acknowledge that the rural digital economy, if developed in an innovative, integrated and inclusive way, has the potential to improve the life-quality of rural citizens and, thereby, contribute to tackling the current depopulation of- and the migration from- rural areas. We consider the preparation of the future EU and national policies as an opportunity to develop the Smart Villages approach. Smart Villages have the potential to increase economic and social cohesion, and improve the social equality of our societies, which is especially visible between rural and urban areas.

Smart Villages are “rural areas and communities which build on their existing strengths and assets as well as on developing new opportunities”, where “traditional and new networks and services are enhanced by means of digital, telecommunication technologies, innovations and the better use of knowledge”.

EU Action for Smart Villages,

European Commission

The Smart Villages initiative aims to create rural areas where people can and want to live, because innovative, digital solutions make their lives easy and comfortable. Business models and platforms from the circular economy and the sharing economy are great examples, which also could be delivered to rural areas.

Franc Bogovic and Tibor Szanyi,

European Parliament

We wish to see Smart-Villages become a model in some EU Member States already in 2019. Smart Villages are made up of people who take the initiative to mobilise local assets to solve the challenges and seize the opportunities they face. Digital technologies are a powerful tool for smart villages but not the only one. These model villages will offer human capacity-building tools and create synergy between some of the following technological achievements:

- Precision farming: reducing input, while maximising output through the help of sensors and decision support systems and, thereby, improving the food supply chain while protecting resources and the environment;
- Digital platforms offering all essential services, such as e-learning, e-health (better access to medical care), e-administration, transport, gastronomy, social services, P2C platforms circumventing oligopolistic retail structures and increasing quality and choice of products.
- Shared economy for expensive technical solutions and equipment;
- Circular economy reducing waste and saving resources;
- Biobased economy through the evolution of research, innovation and technology;
- Renewable energy is especially relevant in rural areas where there is not only space but also easy access to the necessary natural resources (wind, sun, water, soil, wood, biomass);
- Rural tourism, which includes eco-, health- farming- and recreational-tourism, has the potential to create new and high-value jobs on a large scale;
- Social innovation in rural services and entrepreneurship.

By introducing the above initiatives, rural employment opportunities will undergo a value-added transition. Complementing labour-intensive farming jobs, a wide range of knowledge-intensive workplaces will be created locally: agronomists, drone operators, bio-technologists, lab technicians, mechatronics, electronic and IT engineers. Adjacent to farming enterprises, a new service sector will spring to life. And, with it, the possibility for the youth to return home from their studies and still pursue white-collar jobs that further their specialisation.

To reach these goals:

- We need to invest in our rural communities; develop knowledge and digital skills, strengthen entrepreneurship, improve resilience and self-reliance, develop local infrastructures, capacity and quality of life;
- We acknowledge that the European Union already offers four large funding instruments (such as the CAP, Horizon 2020, EFSI and ESIF) geared to boost the development of rural economy. However, more can be done to create synergies;
- We want to make it simpler for rural communities to work with the full range and scope of these financial instruments, for instance through the use of rural innovation brokers, developing synergetic approaches to rural development, and incentivising investments;
- We are convinced that a structured rollout of existing digital tools, as one large interconnected rural region, can create unprecedented synergies and create a high-tech, high life-standard model for rural areas around the world;
- We believe that the Smart Villages approach can stimulate the necessary private funding to create sustainable jobs and growth in rural areas;
- We are convinced that we can fight rural poverty and improve social inclusion by accelerating job creation in the technology, mobility, local services, tourism, agricultural and bio-based sectors in rural areas.

We believe in a Smarter Future for Rural Areas in the EU! We believe that the Smart Villages initiative is the appropriate tool to promote digital and social transformation. It is essential in redesigning the future of food and farming, and it helps to sustain, rebuild and develop strong rural communities throughout the Union.

Bled, 13th April