Smart Villages and Rural Towns in Ireland: Revitalising Rural Areas through Community-Led Innovation

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A Rural Development practitioner's perspective

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IRISH LOCAL DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

Promoting and supporting the work of Local Development Companies in Ireland

- 49 Local Development Companies (LDCs) in Ireland
- 35 (Rural) implement LEADER

- \+ Complementary Programmes:
  - SICAP (Social Inclusion Prog)
  - Local Employment Service
  - Jobs Club
  - Community Schemes – TUS / RSS
  - Migrant & Belonging Services
  - Volunteer Centres
  - PEACE Prog (Border Region)
  - Environment Initiatives
  - Community Health & Wellbeing

INTEGRATED COMMUNITY LED LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

- Needs of rural communities are often **multi facetted and complex** – requiring a **coordinated approach** to rural development
- LDCs in Ireland have been working to employ **a 'one-stop-shop' approach, blending programme funds** to achieve an integrated approach for rural communities

LEADER 2014-2020

Smart Village – a totally new approach?

- There are over 2,500+ LEADER Local Action Groups operating across Europe
- The LEADER Initiative was established by the European Commission in 1991 and is a method of **mobilising and delivering rural development** in local rural communities.
- The main aim of LEADER is **to strengthen the rural economy and to improve the quality of life in rural areas**. There is a strong **emphasis on leadership from the rural communities**.
- In countries like Ireland where the LEADER method is well developed and utilised, we would argue that the **SVs concept and objectives is currently being pursued through our LEADER approach**
- The **7 key principles of LEADER**, have been identified as essential for Smart Villages
- However, ILDN welcomes the **renewed focus on rural villages and countryside's** that the Smart Village agenda provides

Smarter Integrated LEADER / CLLD approach

- Our Rural areas and countryside's are undergoing dynamic changes

- Changes in agriculture and the **ongoing transition of our rural economies** as places for the consumption of place based activities i.e. tourism, recreation, cultural /social activity and other common good assets are evident

- EU programmes like LEADER must continually evolve **to meet the needs of rural communities** and **to help communities capitalise on emerging opportunities** in areas like renewable energy, climate transition, mobility, bio and circular economy etc

- The renewed focus which the Smart Village approach provides can help programmes like LEADER **to look afresh at its approach and to build some new concepts** within the LEADER methodology for the benefit of our rural areas.

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland?

What a Smart Village is:

- Smart Villages are about **channelling the energy, vision and commitment of local people** towards action
- It is very much **about a process**, where the **local community takes on an active role** in shaping its own future.
- A SV strategy is very much **context dependent – rooted in the needs and opportunities of a community**
- **Every village / countryside can be smart**, but it requires **effective support programmes** which are **designed to be flexible** and can be used by local communities **to address their needs and unlock local potential**
- EU Rural Development Programmes should allow communities to achieve results in a simple, flexible and cost-effective manner – **the funding should suit the needs, rather than the need having to suit the funding**

What a Smart Village is not:

- Smart Villages strategies should not be perceived, interpreted or promoted as **yet another layer of formal, comprehensive territorial strategic document** (ENRD)
- **Instead, it builds on existing** programmes and will be integrated into existing local structures and strategies like LEADER / CLLD
- It won't be a panacea for all ills of rural areas, but **it does provide an important and renewed focus**

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland?

What to look for in a Smart Village Approach:

- Evidence of **a group of local citizen** who are willing to drive the SV process - legitimate, open and inclusive
- A clear expression of **a community vision for change** related to identified to problems / opportunities
- Evidence that the SV strategy is designed to find **new or alternative solutions to underlying challenges and opportunities** in the specific context of the local people
- A simple, tailor-made **road-map** with:

  i) a clear explanation of the sequence of cooperation actions proposed by the community,

  ii) an overview of how (and by whom) these actions will be managed,

  iii) an outline of how the wider community have and will be effectively engaged in the process,

  iv) an estimation of related costs, and

  v) an explanation of how results will be measured and monitored.
- Where appropriate, **a business model** for the **long-term financial sustainability** of the SV Strategy
- Any **linkages** between the SV Strategy and other existing broader strategies, digital, smart specialisation

Emerging Trends

*"**two out of every five jobs across Ireland are at 'high risk' of automation***" – Irish Times

- *"We need to provide **more autonomy to local regions to take the initiative**. Our focus needs to be on **supporting grassroots initiatives**, with a particular **emphasis on skills and education** and on activities that will **unlock untapped economic potential**".*

- A series of Irish Times articles explores five challenges facing rural Ireland – diversity and migration; poverty; rapid growth; post-recession recovery; and depopulation – and ways to overcome them.

"As cities become the dominant centre for economic activity, rural areas, towns and small cities are being left behind, and these spatial differences have been credited with the rise of right-wing political movements." (Dr Frank Crowley)

"A whole tier of Irish towns and villages need major investment. Can they be saved?"

'We need to provide more autonomy to local regions to take the initiative.

'Focus must be on supporting grassroots initiatives to help towns left behind'

"Overall there are 211,610 commercial properties in Ireland and 27,951 were vacant in quarter 4 of 2018 – implying a national vacancy rate of 13.2%.

(GeoView Commercial Vacancy)

STOCK OF COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

211,610
TOTAL STOCK

183,659
OCCUPIED COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

27,951
VACANT COMMERCIAL PROPERTIES

VACANCY RATES

13.2%
NATIONAL VACANCY RATE

18.9%
SLIGO RECORDED THE HIGHEST VACANCY RATE AT 18.9%

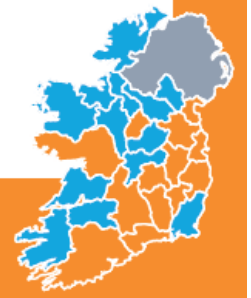
10.4%
MEATH RECORDED THE LOWEST VACANCY RATE AT 10.4%

YEAR-ON-YEAR TRENDS

13
COUNTIES HAD AN INCREASE IN VACANCY RATES

13
COUNTIES HAD DECREASES IN VACANCY RATES

0
COUNTIES HAD UNCHANGED RATES



Changes in national, provincial, town, and Dublin district vacancy rates from Q4 2017 to Q4 2018 can be found on page 2 onwards.

Backed by:

The Irish Times recently asked its readers for their suggestions and views on what can be done to reverse town decline. Dec 2018

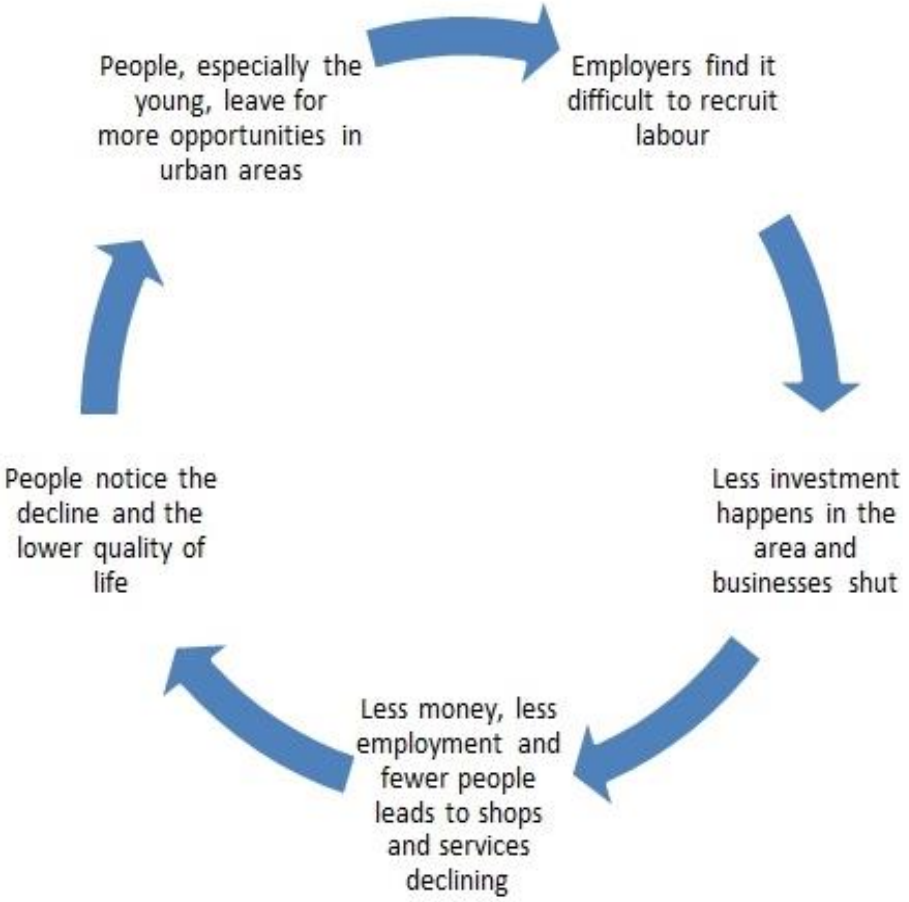
One suggestion:

> *“In France, there is apparently a government scheme which provides farmers and pensioners with weekly* vouchers to eat in their local eateries”

Vacant shops turned into art studios and exhibition spaces in new Glasgow strategy

‘Eleven vacant shop units on the city's High Street and Saltmarket will be given over to clients working in the creative industries’.

Cycles of Rural Decline



- A core aim of LEADER is to tackle ‘cycles of decline’ in our rural communities.
- The countryside struggles with achieving a critical mass of demand for services and infrastructure
- This leads to reduced rates of business creation and reduced investment
- Results in further slowing of economic development and in loss of job opportunities.
- This results in more people leaving the area
- With less people living in the area, there is even less critical mass of users of services
- Area becomes even less attractive for people to live in and for investment

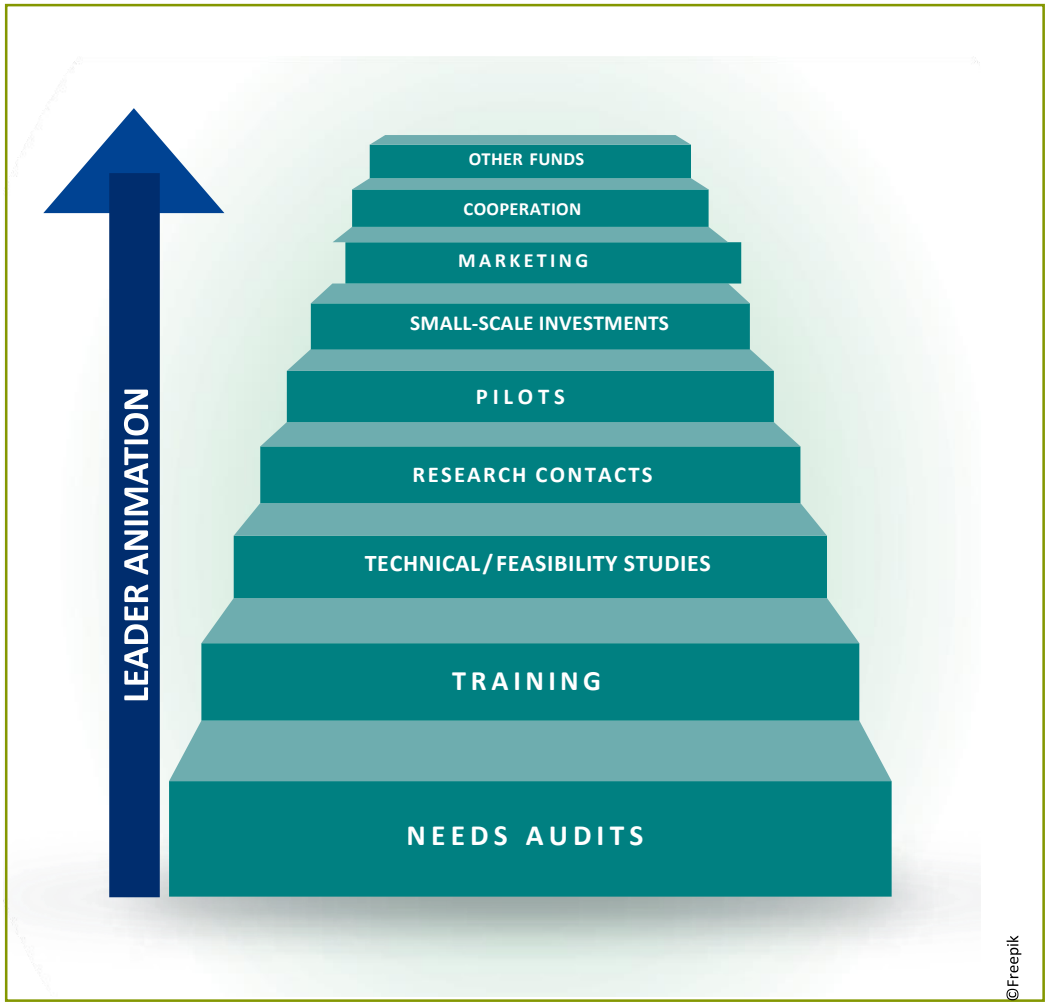
Building local capacity through LEADER community Animation

A key objective of the Smart Village concept is the development and use of Social Innovation

Social Innovation is:

"The reconfiguring of social practices in response to societal challenges which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal wellbeing and necessarily includes the engagement of third sector actors." (SIMRA)

- *Social enterprise can also underpin rural wellbeing by providing community services often in multipurpose hubs*
- *In Italy, farm women are collaborating in a social enterprise to provide care services for the very young & the very old.*
- *When a village shop or pub closes it can be taken on by a community enterprise to become a multi- service hub.*



Ideal Model
Integrated Smart CLLD – Through Social Innovation

EAFRD | Other ESI Funds | National Funds

CLLD Multi Fund

LEADER
Building Smart Villages
Through Smart CLLD

EU LEVEL

EAFRD 10%
ERDF 10%
ESF 10%
EMFF 10%

CLLD Fund
CLLD regulation with one new set of rules for
RURAL
URBAN
COASTAL

Focus areas of
EAFRD
ERDF
ESF
EMFF

NATIONAL LEVEL

Partnership agreement with EU

Operational programme

RURAL
URBAN
COASTAL

LOCAL LEVEL

Local developmnet strategy

LDS

Measures designed by local action group

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland?

Rural areas are diverse, so SV approaches in LEADER will need to be flexible:

Being a Smart Village means: (ENRD 2018)

- *Using **digital technology** when appropriate*
- ***Thinking beyond the village itself** – Smart Villages understand that they exist surrounded by the countryside, other villages, towns and cities – they also activate these linkages*
- *Building **new forms of cooperation and alliances** – between farmers and other rural actors; between municipalities, the private sector and civil society*
- *Integrating the **bottom-up and the top-down approaches***
- *Smart Villages are **place sensitive, they take stock of local assets**, use the best available local knowledge and take the initiative to shape the surrounding reality*

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland.

A key finding from the ENRD SV working group process is that:

- *The TG on Smart Villages recommends using the existing Rural Development tools and instruments like LEADER to advance the objectives*
- *"LEADER /CLLD has an essential role to play in terms of mobilising and empowering local communities; developing their capacity to design and implement community-led initiatives; promoting innovation and experimentation; and, more generally, in accompanying communities throughout the process of realising their longer term vision."*
- *"Therefore, in principle, LEADER already includes all the elements needed to implement the Smart Village concept, and as mentioned, in many areas LAGs are already engaged in the kinds of activities envisaged under this approach"*
- *"LEADER LAGs will need to build on this catalytic role, …. They will need to initiate and facilitate deeper conversations with village communities on existing and emerging opportunities .."*

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland?

- "The actions that LAGs carry out includes mobilising local people, facilitating conversations on challenges and opportunities …" means that;

- LEADER can be a particularly powerful tool for initiating and facilitating a process for implementing a Smart Village approach (ENRD 2019)

Obstacles / barriers:

- "LAGs ability to implement LEADER is constrained **by bureaucracy and administration**" *(European Court of Auditors 2010)*
- A survey by ENRD in 2017 found "that 84% of LAGs across Europe reported that their ability to implement LEADER was constrained by **bureaucracy and administration**"
- "LAGs often find that it is the application of **additional national rules that are impeding their capacity to support innovation, cooperation**, and building links between sectors – all of which are central to the concept of Smart Villages.

ENRD Suggestions for strengthening LEADER / CLLD support to the Smart Village concept

1 **A more flexible package of LEADER/CLLD support for collective/small/ risky projects**	**Removing the obstacles mentioned above and ensuring that LAGs can provide faster, more flexible and more effective support for community-led collaboration in their territories.** For instance: • Simplified procedures (control, project selection, etc.); • Integrated project funding (e.g. themed projects); • Umbrella projects; • Use of SCOs & other methods to support collective, small-scale & innovative local projects; • **Additional resources for citizen engagement and community building** and for the preparation and animation of collective projects; and • Include an **'innovation animator or brokers'** within the LEADER implementing team.
2 **A broader scope of intervention**	Reinforce LEADER/CLLD's mandate and **provide adequate resources** to LAGs to venture into areas such as **renewables, mobility, rural services and the digital economy** – all of which are resource intensive and: involve bringing together and negotiating **joint actions among different institutions and stakeholders**, sometimes even from outside the local territory (e.g. research institutes, ICT enterprises, etc.).

ENRD Suggestions for strengthening LEADER / CLLD support to the Smart Village concept

3

A better alignment of LEADER/CLLD with other policies and instruments

Strengthen LEADER's capacity to act as a one-stop-shop for coordinating and linking policies and instruments at local level:

- **Simplify multifunding**, for example, through the use of the lead-fund rule.
- Ensure that the **strategic role of LEADER/CLLD in enabling local communities** is fully reflected in the CAP Strategic Plans and Cohesion Fund Operational Prog's
- **Ensure alignment** with Cooperation, Knowledge Transfer and Investment Measures of the CAP Regulation, **as well as with other legislative frameworks**, such as the **EU energy package**, which aims to support the development of **community energy initiatives** in the EU.
- Create **governance structures that ensure LEADER/CLLD support for Smart Villages is coordinated** with additional support from other policies and sources of funds (for example, in the Austrian Tyrol, **multi-funded LAGs** provide **a local one-stop-shop for many policies which are coordinated to achieve common goals** by one department at regional level.
- Facilitate **access to additional resources** if LAGs are expected to take on new responsibilities or activities.

ENRD Suggestions for strengthening LEADER / CLLD support to the Smart Village concept

4

The use of indicators and metrics that better reflect the wider contribution of LEADER/CLLD to the longer term goal of transition

The number of people covered by Smart Villages strategies/plans has already been proposed as an indicator. But this could be complemented with other indicators that better assess progress in achieving the specific longer term goals at local level through LEADER / CLLD (for instance, the extent of community engagement and voluntary contributions, local carbon emissions reductions, new community-owned/run businesses and service, etc).

In selecting additional indicators, Managing Authorities should also:

- Further **develop qualitative indicators**, as not all results and effects can be expressed by standard numerical indicators; and
- Ensure **that indicators and targets are realistic and reflect local needs** and conditions rather than driving the strategy and discouraging risk.

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland.

In conclusion:

- We would agree with the proposition of ENRD that LEADER is already doing Smart Village work in many parts of Europe
- Some obstacles need to be addressed (at EU and MS level)
- The focus on Smart villages provides a useful opportunity for us all to look afresh at our work in the next LEADER programme
- There is a lot at stake here –
  - *"A whole tier of Irish towns and villages need major investment. Can they be saved?"*
  - *In LEADER, we believe they can, with the right resources and commitment as outlined earlier*
- *As LEADER practitioners here in IE, we look forward to working with our colleagues in the LAs, other state agencies, Department of Rural and Community Development and most importantly – rural communities who are committed to securing their future.*

How LEADER/CLLD can support Smart Villages and Rural Towns throughout Ireland?

- **The important point is the rural development is an iterative process**
- **The importance of experimenting – trying new approaches, and supporting rural communities in their successes and when they are less successful**
- **The cost of failure for our rural communities will always be much much more than the cost of trying something new – and learning from it**

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‘More LEADER for more Smart Villages’

Thank You

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