# How will digitalisation be affected by Coronavirus?

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Coronavirus is a game changer. It is disrupting the way we work, do shopping, learn, entertain, communicate, and have social relations. Coronavirus is also generating a deep transformation in the way the production systems are organised. Everybody engages in thinking about what the 'new normal' life will be. Whether we are aware or not, we are all participating in an unexpected and involuntary giant foresight exercise.



For the Horizon 2020 DESIRA project, the present situation is an endless source of insights, and a living laboratory: we can explore possible rural futures in relation to digitalisation just observing - and practicing and reflecting on - what happens around us.

From the viewpoint of an optimist, a vision of connected rural areas is forming, in which digital connectivity allows overcoming distances and, consequently, to reduce the rural-urban gap, supported by several examples. Let us consider work organisation, for instance: sectors with a high concentration of information, workers have reorganised almost immediately. In universities, online lectures have begun everywhere, and the response has been satisfactory, on average. Public administrations have updated their procedures with a speed never seen before. Teleworkers, evidence says, can be more productive than commuters. They can organise their time flexibly and be more focused on objectives. For rural commuters, teleworking implies a sensible reduction of travel costs, translating into more time for private life. There is also an environmental benefit arising from it, as less commuting implies fewer carbon emissions.

When the lockdown will be over, villages with a high density of teleworkers may see their demand for local goods and services boosted, and the community life revitalised. Local administrations can invest in infrastructures and services that may attract rural teleworkers.

The pessimists will look at the poor quality of internet connection, at social inequalities - different digital literacy will enlarge the gulf between individuals and groups - or at gender inequalities - the lockdown has impacted in a different way on men and women. They consider the displacement effect of e-commerce on small business or the increasing disparity between small and large farms when robotisation will replace commuting workers. They also foresee that online communication will create even more social distance and loss of community life. They may also say that teleworking will be an opportunity to increase workers' surveillance. Others may stress the risk of cyberattacks.

The contribution of both pessimists and optimists, enthusiasts, and sceptics will be crucial to shape the rural future. Digital technologies can be regulated, and their development can be oriented towards different goals. An improved capacity of rural communities to understand and foresee the impact of digitalisation will contribute in a substantial way to a fair and sustainable rural development, and the DESIRA project is working towards this objective.

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