SECOND MEETING OF THE RURAL DIGITALISATION FORUM

Highlights from the RDF Scenario Planning workshops

April 2022

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Between December 2021 and February 2022, the Rural Digitalisation Forum (RDF) of DESIRA (Digitisation: Economic and Social Impacts in Rural Areas) organised an EU scenario planning exercise. The activity was structured in two workshops, which took place on 7 December 2021 and 8 February 2022.

Bringing together 30 stakeholders from different backgrounds (research, public authorities, SMEs, stakeholders' organisations, members of National Rural Networks), the exercise was intended to create linkages between the 2031 scenarios developed by DESIRA Living Labs and the European Commission's long-term vision for rural areas.

Building on the existing approach (stronger, connected, more resilient rural areas that foster well-being, and prosperous rural areas), DESIRA aimed to add a fifth element: *the vision for digitalisation of rural areas.*

First Workshop: Setting the context

7 December 2021

On 7 December 2021, the first workshop of the EU RDF foresight exercise was held. The event featured presentations from high-level speakers, who introduced the necessary context for the exercise. Around 30 experts from different backgrounds, spread across breakout rooms, discussed how digitalisation could affect the different areas of action composing the long-term vision for rural areas.

Stronger rural areas

Facing weaknesses of the administration and lack of services provision, municipalities have the potential to join forces, using existing digital technologies. If rural broadband penetration increases in the future, it can open opportunities, if the lack of digital skills in some communities is addressed. Decentralised policy-making can provide autonomy to rural areas, allowing them to pursue their own political agendas independent of central government, while allowing them to still have a voice in the national context. Online services and platforms can welcome and attract urban dwellers and businesses.

Connected rural areas

Digitalisation can create new market dynamics, promote remote and flexible work, develop community digital networks, enhance the valorisation of value chains, and bridge the gap between urban and rural areas. However, there is a cultural resistance. Rural dwellers may not accept a technological future,

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 818194

if it is seen as a threat to traditional knowledge and identity, and presents loss of human interactions and sense of community.

More resilient rural areas that foster well-being

Digitalisation can lower the use of agricultural inputs (fertilisers, pesticides, antimicrobials) and facilitate agriculture, livestock, and forestry management. Labour-intensive manual work, as well as administrative and bureaucratic processes, can be reduced. Rural activities would diversify and open up labour options for women and business. Nonetheless, there are some risks such as security of data use, loss of farmers' and other actors' techniques, dependency on robotisation, reduction of labour and lack of affordability of digital technologies.

Prosperous rural areas

Employment and the value-added of farming and agri-food activities could both improve thanks to digital technologies. Robots and other devices could make agricultural activities more feasible in areas severely affected by climate change. Appropriate technologies could improve the productivity of agroecological practices, so far neglected by agri-tech. Farmers could get more visibility on the market through digital tools. On the negative side, tech giants could take over the market in rural areas and affect small producers. People not used to digital tools, such as the elderly or those with few resources, could be left behind.

Second workshop: EU Scenario exercise

8 Februrary 2021

The second workshop of the RDF scenario planning exercise was held on 8 February 2022. The RDF experts came together to contribute to the work of DESIRA on the Scenario Planning, linking it to the long-term vision for rural areas. During the second half of 2021, 20 DESIRA Living Labs carried out scenario planning workshops, in which they developed plausible narratives of what the future could look like, by 2031 taking into account known drivers of change that have specific effects over time. DESIRA has synthesised this work in a report that compares the different scenarios by type of region, sector/sub-sector, and type of game-changer.

Building the narrative 'Digital Rural Areas'

The aim of the discussion was to shape a fifth element or area of action for the long-term vision, 'Digitalisation of rural areas'. The long-term vision for 2040 is optimistic. In order to summarise findings that can be used to construct the fifth element, the workshops focused on elements of the plausible, optimistic narratives, termed 'better not best' and 'utopia' in the methodology.

Digital rural areas

By 2040, rural areas are vibrant, attract newcomers and offer qualified jobs with decent salaries. Rural areas are fully connected to urban areas, and population flows are bi-directional. The rural digital divide has consistently reduced, as governance mechanisms in place that monitor it have successfully intervened with specific initiatives. Rural administrations can offer a wide range of digital technologies to all, and this significantly improves their quality of life. Digital technologies fully support local administrations in managing the rural environment and the related environmental risks.

Building on the 'Drivers of Change' (DoC) identified by DESIRA Living Labs through these workshops, RDF participants held three rounds of discussions in breakout rooms, following a building blocks methodology, which provided input through the following guiding questions:

Round 1: What is relevant from DESIRA and what is missing?

Participants reflected on how the DESIRA Drivers of Change can help rural communities and businesses reach their full potential in the coming decades, as well as potential DoC or concepts that might have been missing.

Round 2: What should be done?

Building on the discussion from the previous round, participants discussed possible actions needed to achieve these impacts by 2040, as well as when these actions should take place.

Round 3: Proposed solutions

In the third and final round of discussions, the experts proposed concrete solutions that can contribute to the vision statement, and define what should be done and who should do it to achieve this vision by 2040.

What is relevant from DESIRA?

Opportunities related to digitalisation:

- Digitalisation allows a more flexible approach to work and education, including remote participation, which has been enhanced by the pandemic.
- Digitalisation can make rural areas more attractive to young people.
- Digitalisation can support new social services and collaborative actions in communities, for example, with support of digital platforms.
- Use of robotics and drones will shape agricultural activity.
- Short supply chains can bring extra value to local businesses.
- Local supply chains enable consumers to make more ethical choices and shop locally.
- Digitalisation brings opportunities for new business models, empowering farmers, foresters, and other rural actors.
- Digital technologies allow for an improved use of resources, and a more sustainable agriculture, promoting the transition to agro-ecology.
- Rural areas can act as guardians of biodiversity.

Threats:

- Local knowledge on environmental monitoring could be lost due to ageing and retiring populations, but digital platforms can capture this knowledge.

Conditions for grasping opportunities:

- Digitalisation should not leave anyone behind, certain groups might need extra support to adopt digital technologies (e.g. the elderly).
- There is a need for data privacy standards, and data ownership needs to be regulated.
- Equal access to connectivity is a precondition.
- Technological solutions should be co-designed so they are appropriate for each rural area.
- Balance of power: rural dwellers should have a stronger say in local decision-making.
- Urban recognition of rural role in society: the urban-rural gap should be closed.

What should be done?

- Strenghthen services, such as education, childcare, housing, and mobility, to attract population to rural areas, especially attracting or retaining young people or families. Initiatives that foster urban-rural cooperation could be set-up.
- Enhance access to digital tools and digital knowledge through, for example, digital AKIS.
- Municipalities should be proactive instead of reactive, and put policies in place to retain rural inhabitants and investors.
- Establish focus groups at municipal level to reflect on issues at local level.
- Ensure digitalisation does not replace human connections and face-to-face interactions.
- Guarantee connectivity not only in villages, but also in forest and agricultural lands, to improve environmental monitoring.

- Raise awareness and improve skills of municipalities to increase technological acceptance.
- Engage rural people in the design of applications and technologies.
- Create and promote EU data spaces.
- Boost investments linked to the digital transformation, but also strengthen the role of rural agencies to make sure these investments have a positive impact.
- Support start-ups and rural entrepreneurship.
- Improve the capacity of public administration to assess environmental performance.
- Set up open access for data ownership.
- Design policies to ensure the right to own and the right to repair.
- Digitalisation strategies should be designed at local or municipal level.
- Incorporate tools and mechanisms to allow rural citizens to contribute to decision-making.

Proposed solutions by RDF experts

Governing digitalisation in rural areas:

- Balance the roles of governments and markets as drivers of digitalisation.
- Develop digital platforms that enable collaboration and cooperation of rural areas, knowledge exchange, peer-to-peer learning and capacity building.
- Develop online platforms to support access to local food and sustainable products.
- Encourage strong cooperation with different types of stakeholders (telecom operators, local authorities, rural citizens, researchers).
- Introduce and enhance financial regulation and financial support for connectivity.
- Reinforce the role of extension services on technical and subsidies advice.
- Establish indicators to monitor impacts of digitalisation.

Creating a conducive environment for sustainable digitalisation:

- Implement housing policies and social services to attract and retain people.
- Improve environmental standards, needed for agricultural production and environmental management.
- Empower municipalities, through skilled human resources, joining forces with other municipalities, getting technical support from higher levels, promoting bottom-up decision-making.
- Enhance coordination and interoperability between different administrations.
- Adapt environmental regulation to acknowledge digital realities.
- Improve representation for rural populations at the political level.
- Foster the role of programmes such as LEADER to emphasise digitalisation opportunities.

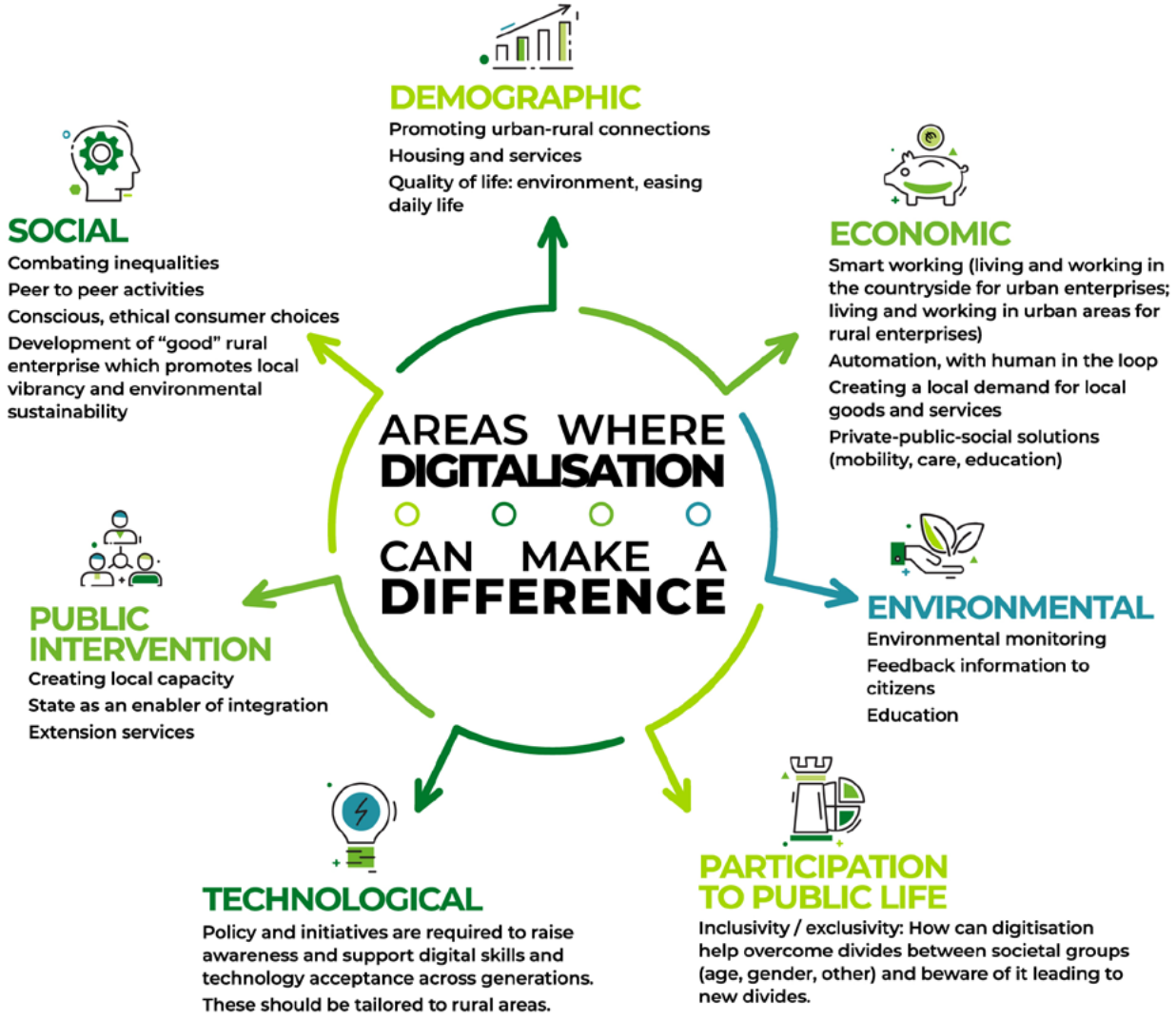
Final remarks

Gianluca Brunori, coordinator of the project, concluded the second workshop, highlighting that **the digital future for rural areas will depend on the vision that we have now**. Digitalisation will not automatically lead to a better future, so we need to identify a clear vision on how we want rural areas to be, and how digitalisation can support this vision.

It is important to understand what contributes to a good quality of life in rural areas: social services, remote working, mobility, and connectedness. Quality of life is linked to vibrant communities that have a sense of community and self-identity, healthy social relations, and institutional capacities. Sometimes it is also strongly linked to the quality of the environment.

Digitalisation can address everything: providing feedback and information concerning the state of the environment, improving the social capital by communication means, integrating services between local administrations, providing data to speed bureaucratic activities up, and robotisation to relieve people from hard manual work or as a solution to staff shortages in rural areas. There is a need to stimulate the creativity and capacities of technology developers. **Rural futures and solutions should be different from urban ones**.

The process should be driven by a bottom-up approach to create change. Central and high-level organisations could act as enablers of social innovation at the local level, and as connectors to link local initiatives together and to improve learning processes among them. This process must be steered, and local initiatives should be integrated. In this sense, visions have a strong influence on creating integration by leaving space for communication between organisations.



HOW TO DRIVE THE TRANSITION?

Dedicated agencies (observation, research, knowledge assessment, network building) at the national/regional level
Connectors (actors that operate to facilitate the access to digital technologies)
Bottom-up approach with a strong strategic component and cooperation/integration efforts

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