THIRD MEETING OF THE RURAL DIGITALISATION FORUM

Highlights from the RDF Policy Workshop

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On 15 November 2022, the Rural Digitalisation Forum (RDF) of DESIRA (Digitisation: Economic and Social Impacts in Rural Areas) held its third meeting, aimed at building together a policy roadmap for sustainable and inclusive rural digitalisation.

The meeting brought together more than 60 experts from different backgrounds (research, public authorities, SMEs, stakeholders' organisations, and members of National Rural Networks). Building on DESIRA's work on policy, such as the national policy analyses and policy briefs, participants contributed to prioritising and validating the list of policy recommendations proposed by DESIRA, as well as identifying success factors, barriers and the role of different actors during implementation. The outcomes of this discussion are incorporated into the DESIRA Policy Roadmap.

A third session was aimed at introducing the DESIRA Ethical Code, as well as to launch the reflection on what ethical and moral issues should this report, which is to be delivered by the end of the project, should contain.

Policy findings from DESIRA

Mar DELGADO, María ALONSO
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Mar Delgado introduced the work that DESIRA has been carrying out regarding policy analysis. The project developed 15 national policy analyses in the countries represented by the project.

Relevant policy proposals regarding rural digitalisation were identified, as well as gaps. This list has been validated through different events (Rural Pact, Smart AgriHubs Final Conference, and DESIRA policy auditions developed by Living Labs).

DESIRA analysed EU policies that influence rural digitalisation from a double perspective: how rural development and cohesion policies are addressing digitalisation in rural areas, and how the EU digital policies consider rural areas, or if they do it at all.

Partners also analysed national policies in the DESIRA countries, particularly how digitalisation policies are being implemented (in terms of context, preparedness, capacity...) but also whether the impact of these policies can be assessed.

Four blocks of work were identified:

- Digitalisation strategies and rural digitalisation strategies
- Broadband strategies
- Digital literacy
- Digital trust

DESIRA preliminary results:

There is insufficient (accessible) data, particularly when we talk about policy impact assessment. Comprehensive rural digitalisation policies to examine are also limited.

The targets for the 1st European Digital Agenda have not been achieved for rural areas. We found important gaps in transposing EU policies to rural areas. Policy adoption is quite uneven, and it depends too much on:

- capacity to integrate and implement policies;
- administrative complexity;
- whether countries are pioneers or followers (for followers was easier, as they had much more experience to rely on);
- timing - how to align these policies with national context and priorities.

The 2030 Path to the Digital Decade has been established so as to leave no one behind, but this objective is still far from being achieved.

The urban-rural digital divide exists for infrastructure and skills. According to the latest Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI 2022), 8.5% of households are not covered by any fixed network, while 32.5% are not served by any NGA technology. In rural areas, only 46% of the rural population have basic digital skills, compared to the 61% in cities. This gap is worsened by the gender gap, as well as demographic challenges (ageing, depopulation).

COVID-19 has been a "digitalisation push", enhancing progress in distance learning, e-health, e-administration, etc. However, the gap between wealthier and poorer groups has been widened by the pandemic, which puts rural areas in a more disadvantaged position.

DESIRA is now working on a Policy Roadmap, identifying policy recommendations around four blocks of action

INFRASTRUCTURE	· Accessible high-quality connectivity1 and digital infrastructures in rural areas
DIGITAL COMPETENCES, LITERACY	· Digital education adapted to different group needs · Easy-to use and affordable digital services to farmers and advisors · Digital competences and digital ecosystems promoted in rural areas
RURAL DIGITALISATION	· Rural digitalisation as a specific policy with appropriate funding · Progress, impacts and efficiency of rural digitalisation policies · Digital solutions to support service provision & e-administration · Awareness about rural issues and values, public engagement
DIGITAL TRUST	· To improve rural and agriculture data governance and data management · To overcome fragmentation and to connect systems (e.g. European Data Space, interoperability) · To support data-driven decision

Workshop 1:
Building a policy roadmap for sustainable and inclusive rural digitalisation in Europe – Key issues

The first workshop of the day was aimed at reflecting and deepening the policy priorities for sustainable and inclusive rural digitalisation, based on the DESIRA findings. Participants explored the key issues that need to be addressed to ensure that rural digitalisation is sustainable and inclusive.

To ensure accessible high-quality connectivity and digital infrastructures in rural areas

- Ubiquitous connectivity to support constant data sharing from field sensors, cattle monitoring systems, etc.
- Accessible high-quality connectivity might enable young people to stay/settle in rural areas.
- Improving infrastructures should go in parallel with improving the digital skills and take-up of local communities.

To improve rural and agriculture data governance and data management

- There is a need to integrate existing data (such as Land Parcel Identification Systems, Farm Sustainability Tool, etc.) and to make them accessible for farmers.
- Reusing data should be a must to facilitate the use of digital applications.

To mainstream digital solutions to support service provision & e-administration in rural areas

- New digital solutions should follow "rural proofing" and "significant scenario" procedures, as they should be tested in all conditions, especially where they will be used.
- People living in rural areas can use technological advances in k ey topics, such as health or education, as a proxy to demand high-quality connectivity.

To monitor rural digitalisation policies progress, impacts and efficiency

- Advisory systems can support farmers in understanding digital technologies and their impact.
- Citizens in rural communities can help in the proccess of monitoring rural digitalisation policies. Key actors, as policy-makers, should become more aware on how to use these monitoring systems.
- Identifying the objectives before monitoring to have a better scope of the efficiency and impacts of these policies.

To overcome fragmentation and to connect systems (e.g., European Data Space, interoperability

- There is a lack of data and proper data management.
- The European Data Space is needeed, to have data on how digital technologies are used across sectors and countries.

To promote digital competences and digital ecosystems in rural areas

- Citizens are not aware of the digital instruments they could use, and farmers are not aware of the benefits of digitalisation. Therefore, there is a need for improved flows of information and communication towards rural stakeholders.
- Aligning the digital tool with the need of the farmer is key: if they don't see in which area they can use this technology, they will reject it.

To provide easy-to-use and affordable digital services to farmers and farmers' advisors

- The provision of digital services should be connected to business development or social enterprise development. Local development strategies have to take this linkage into account.
- Digital services are established as platforms in place. But, what if users lack skills or competences? Establishing semi-autonomous digital helpers within the community can solve this issue.
- As digital technologies are developed more and more putting the focus on user-friendliness, education and competence development will become less and less important and will come naturally.

To raise awareness about rural issues and values, to foster public engagement

- Communication is key when trying to reach unusual or "forgotten" rural areas or rural actors.
- Showcasing best practices, exchanging knowledge and fostering the creation of networks or science-policy-society

interfaces are some ways of raising awareness that have been proven effective in the past.

To streamline digital education in rural areas, adapted to different groups

- The focus should be put on communicating about the benefits of digitalisation, and not so much about skills. As the tools are more user-friendly, less preparation will be needed.

- In order to avoid a widening of the digital divide, it is important to define the specific needs of the different target groups. For example, some socio-demographic groups have specific needs (age, gender, newcomers, etc.), but also depending on the type of business (IT companies, social enterprises, farming, etc.)

To support data-driven decisions.

- A precondition is to further work on data integration, data organisation and data transformation. Intermediary actors, such as farmer advisors, should have a role in these activities, to facilitate the reformulation of data in a way that is comprehensible to the final users.

- It is fundamental to ensure the involvement of the local administration. Datasets and platforms at different administrative levels should be data-compatible and interconnected.

- Making use of data can trigger behavioural change (e.g. changing farming practices) by backing it with financial incentives.

To tackle rural digitalisation as a specific policy with appropriate funding.

- Often the main issue is not the lack of funding but the lack of integrated strategy on how to use these funds for rural digitalisation, including how to create synergies among different funds, priorities and actors.

- There is a need to involve multiple stakeholders, hence going beyond solely the local administration, but including also researchers, practitioners, private actors etc.

- Regional administrations should identify a reference contact for rural digitalisation.

WORKSHOP 2:
Building a policy roadmap for sustainable and inclusive rural digitalisation in Europe – Factors for success

In this second workshop, participants prioritised policy recommendations. They then analysed which are the success factors for the three most important recommendations to succeed and contribute effectively to sustainable and inclusive digitisation.

1 To ensure accessible high-quality connectivity and digital infrastructure in rural areas

A success factor for high-quality connectivity could be the percentage of internet subscriptions. In this sense, local groups can play a key role in steering and deploying community-led initiatives such as B4RN (https://b4rn.org.uk/) to roll out broadband where large providers do not plan to invest. With costs being a barrier to deploy infrastructures, cooperativism can enable joint investments and external funding for kicking-off should be facilitated. To ensure long-term viability of these initiatives -a potential barrier for sustainability-, the promoting communities should be able to purchase shares and receive dividends down the line. These alternative initiatives should be allowed by the policies and strategies in place, and the existing companies should be involved in a way that they also take responsibility.

It would be beneficial to consolidate a pan-European alternative to Starlink-type broadband (https://www.starlink.com/) to secure space-based communication systems. Related to this, digital infrastructure in rural areas should also consider storage capacity with the views to supply reliable and secure data sharing.

A final consideration is the role that platforms and internet service providers could have in deploying connectivity and digital infrastructures. A suggestion could be to contribute through taxes to the broadband roll out, which is key to use their services.

2   To tackle rural digitalisation as a specific policy with appropriate funding

There is a need to implement an integration of different initatives and funding, which should be linked at the same time to different levels of policy-making. Rural digitalisation policies should have a cross-cutting nature, being in a high place for the political agendas, and not addressed only by rural development or agricultural agencies, such as DG AGRI or Minisitries of Agriculture.

The lack of a global framework for rural areas, and not only for rural digitalisation, leads to slowing down the development of specific policies to address this subject.A bottom-up process, and taking inspiration from the local frameworks, could be a solution to overcome this barrier. Society and policy-makers are not fully aware of the imporance of rural areas, the benfits they bring to society as a whole, and the opportunities they bring. A

Finally, different territorial levels have different needs, so it is difficult to find a solution that works across EU rural areas at different governance levels. Each territory needs to identify what are their specific needs, key stakeholders that need to be mobilised, and what are their specific challenges when developing specific rural digitalisation policies.
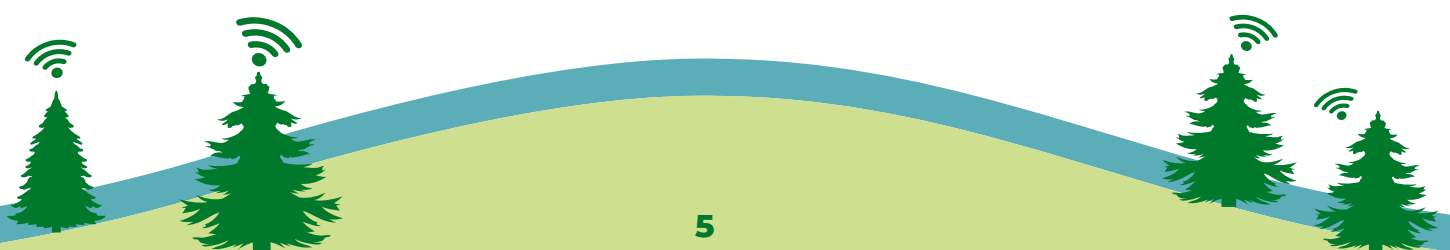
3   To provide easy-to-use and affordable digital services to farmers and farmers' advisors

While it is important to provide easy-to-use and affordable digital services to farmers and farmers' advisors, a success factor can be to allow them as well to test, adopt and adapt digital tools that are more suitable to their own context. In this sense, Digital Innovation Hubs can play a key role, as they can act as a one-stop-shop to showcase digital tools and solutions that farmers can adopt. At the same time, they can also provide testing environments, needed to ensure rural proofing.

Another consideration is where to put the focus in terms of developing digital skills and fostering digital literacy. On the one hand, it is clearly important to ensure that farmers and advisors have the necessary digital skills to reap the benefits of digital transformation to the full. However, if the focus is on ensuring that the digital services offered are intuitive and easy to use, it will not be necessary to invest too many resources in capacity building.

Finally, digital transformation cannot be understood without taking into account the role of human nature. As social beings, different emotions and behaviours play a fundamental role in how communities behave. For example, by showcasing the benefits that other farmers (from the same or another region) get from implementing and using digital technologies, other farmers can be encouraged to try these tools.

On the other hand, farmers also share with their neighbours the tools that are useful to them, coming together to learn and develop digital skills. Sometimes digital literacy groups are created naturally. Harnessing social capital can be a transformative success factor for inclusive and sustainable rural digitalisation.

DESIRA Ethical Code

Silvia ROLANDI
University of Pisa

Silvia Rolandi (UNIPI) introduced the prelimary work into building the DESIRA Ethical Code. The scope of this report, that will be available by the end of the project, is to raise awarness about ethical related issues in rural digitalisation, including a a shared vision, values and principles

for digitisation in agriculture, forestry and rural areas. T

As it is more and more clear that the outcomes of digitisation will depend on how innovation is designed and how the conditions of the context are taken into account, the need for an Ethical Code arises.

wDESIRA aims at developing an Ethical Code that will help research and innovators to anticipate the risks of digitisation and will give policy-makers a criterion for assessment of innovation.

The work started with a literature review, and a compilation of existing ethical codes and codes of conduct. The DESIRA partners found ethic guidelines focused on digitalisation, but the majority of them focused on Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Workshop 3:
Building the DESIRA Ethical Code

On an interactive session, participants were asked to exchange about ethical issues related to applying digital technologies in a rural context. Most of the responses were related to data, data management, data sovereignty and data governance.

During the discussion, particpants raised the issue of farmers providing data on crop variety performance that can be used by large seed companies. Farmers power in the market reduced due to the use of data collected by retailers.

Another point that emerged was the extent to which digital platforms that are offered without training or advice are fair. When digital tools are used by farmers and advisors, they assume the data collected belongs to them. hey assume it is their data. Data ownership is usually not clear, nor the use of this data.

Data access at local level is limited because of data protection issues, but it affects the extent we can research local approaches and practices.

Keynote presentations: The role of digitalisation in CAP Strategic Plans, and the Rural Digital Index

Juan Manuel VELASCO
Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development (DG AGRI), European Commission

The event also featured Juan Manuel Velasco, from DG AGRI.D1 Rural Areas and Networks (European Commission) as keynote speaker., During his first intervention, he presented on the role of digitalisation in CAP Strategic Plans. Mr Velasco highlighted that all Member States (MS) have developed digitalisation strategies under the cross-cutting objective of knowledge, innovation, and digitalisation. These strategies aim to address key aspects such as the digital divide, barriers to the uptake of digital technologies, skills and data availability, and the funding gap.

However, Mr Velasco noted that further reinforcement and monitoring is often needed to ensure that these strategies are effective. MS have drawn up interventions tailored towards digitalisation to address identified needs, and have considered synergies with other national/private and EU funding instruments, such as the RRF, ERDF, EAFRD, DEP, and Horizon Europe.

Despite these efforts, Mr Velasco pointed out that there has been limited consideration of digital technologies as an enabling tool for other CAP objectives, particularly for environment, climate, and rural-related objectives. Additionally, the needs of rural areas have been scarce in the planning of these strategies. Overall, Mr Velasco's presentation highlighted the importance of digitalisation in the CAP Strategic Plans, but also the need for further action to ensure that digitalisation is fully integrated into other CAP objectives and that the needs of rural areas are adequately addressed.

In his second intervention, Mr Velasco presented the Rural Digital Index, which was launched in response to a request for a rural-focused Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI), including remote areas. The Index allows for Commission reporting on rural DESI in a disaggregated and holistic way, providing a general score of MS digitalisation in rural areas based on three blocks: use of the internet, human capital, and broadband coverage.

The Rural Digital Index provides MS with the ability to make informed decisions on how and when to strengthen efforts to improve digitalisation in rural areas. However, Mr Velasco also noted that there are some limitations in the data collection process. For instance, enterprise/business data only records head office data without location information, and the enterprise component is not included in the rural DESI index. The report also focuses on the rural/urban breakdown, with broadband assessed almost everywhere, and the DESI report including the rural situation where relevant. Mr Velasco highlighted that the 2030 target of 1 Giga for everyone everywhere is quite challenging to reach, particularly in scattered households in remote rural areas.

Overall, Mr Velasco's presentation highlighted the Rural Digital Index as a tool for assessing the state of digitalisation in rural areas and for supporting further efforts to bridge the digital divide. However, he also acknowledged that there are limitations in the data collection process, and that reaching the 2030 connectivity target will be a challenging task in some rural areas.

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