

SMART VILLAGES IN THE EU AND BEYOND

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SMART VILLAGES IN THE EU AND BEYOND

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2019

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-78769-846-8 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-845-1 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-78769-847-5 (Epub)



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ISO 14001



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Editors' Preface

Connecting the slopes of a valley hidden in the mountains of Arcadia (Peloponnese, Greece), the arch bridges in Fouskari stretching over the waters brought by three springs, are suggestive of how life might have looked like just a few decades back. The stone-curved aqueducts and tiny water basins remind us of the lifestyle and hardship the village inhabitants endured. But the view of the green slopes of the valley also seem to be reviving the laughter of girls and women meeting here in the past to do laundry or take a bath. *Et in Arcadia Ego* is a potent title of a seventeenth century painting by Nicolas Poussin. The idyllic representation of shepherds and the mystery that the painting conveys remind us of Virgil's *Arcadia* and the archetypal pastoral milieu. Explored and described by Pausanias (110–180 AD), a land filled with treasures still waiting to be explored, Arcadia is a land bursting with myths of Gods, nymphs, and good charms. Located in direct vicinity of Ancient Olympia, it is a land poignant with thousand years of history, heroism, and courage curved in the walls of abandoned castles, and told over and over again by trees and rivers. But Arcadia is depopulating rapidly today. This book stems from our concern about Arcadia and its inhabitants; it derives from our commitment to revitalize the area and from our hope that it is feasible.

This book would not be possible without the Publisher who cordially embraced the book idea, the reviewers, and the contributing authors. Special 'thank you' is extended to the Editorial Assistant, Ms Anna Scaife, and the entire Emerald Publishing team.

We dedicate this book to Arcadia and the memories it brings,
The Editors: Anna Visvizi, Miltiadis D. Lytras, and György Mudri

Foreword

Smart Villages Approach for a Brighter Future of Rural Communities in the European Union

The European Union (EU) is an exemplary smart model, constantly investing in innovation and development. Along with this smart model and beyond the pure economic advantages, the quality of life of people has always been the key force behind the EU policymaking. However, the impact of these efforts has been different in urban and rural areas. Therefore, today, there is a clear need for a new integrated, innovative approach to rural areas in the EU. This approach can be best termed as 'smart villages' approach.

The expansion of ICT-enhanced applications and services enable societies to improve their opportunities and improve their attractiveness and the quality of life not only in urban but in rural areas as well. We see many twenty-first century innovations in our constituencies; innovations, that are usually a little bit more and a little bit quicker in urban areas. People dealing with rural areas sense it for a while, even before the concrete actions appeared in the form of the smart villages concept.

Of course, one may wonder: what exactly does 'smart' mean for us as politicians in the smart villages concept? Is it life, water, energy, community, or food? Is it the technology, the ways and means, or the status? What do villages, or rural areas in the concept actually stand for?

Our first answer is that there are different smart elements, which definitely share some common layers. Their meaning, however, may differ in different parts of our globe. But being smart definitely is about intelligent applications, the various interactions of the existing and new technologies, and also the efficient use of big data analysis adjustments. The concept of smart villages does not propose a one-size-fits-all solution. It is territorially sensitive, based on the needs and potential of a given territory, and strategy-led, supported by new or existing territorial strategies. In addition, when talking about European villages, and rural areas, we do not solely mean the 22 million EU farmers, or people working directly in the agricultural sector. More than half of the EU's land area is within regions classified as predominantly rural. More than 112 million people inhabit these areas. We are happy to welcome and commend many EU objectives under different funds and policies, such as the Common Agricultural Policy, related to innovation, digitalization, transformation, and modern rural life in the EU.

At the same time, we can extend the approach to become global, as rural areas face specific challenges that need specific solutions everywhere. Aging populations, lack of services (medical, postal, health, transport, and energy), and limited broadband must all be addressed. Ensuring digital access can help sustain a healthy agriculture sector that in turn can help rural areas stem

themselves against depopulation, and help them retain young people. The concept sets out to create liveable villages, where people can and want to settle, because innovative, interconnected digital solutions improve their lifestyles. New business models, and platforms based on shared economy, currently concentrated in urban areas, are the best examples. However, this is just the beginning. The authors of this book described various technologies for completing this particular smart project, reflecting the many layers involved. We are hopeful that this approach helps you to grasp the complexity of this concept.

The smart villages concept has been proposed and successfully launched to a niche for the sake of rural areas, not only in the EU but also in the global arena as well. We had various discussions and consultations with different stakeholders including laymen and highly specialized academics and rural development practitioners. It has been pushed forward by our common efforts, by our persistent fight for the smart villages concept. We have been actively promoting this concept via a pilot project and preparatory actions since 2015. Indeed, we believe that smart villages offer the best way forward for a sustainable realization of the vision outlined in the Cork Declaration, while rural areas face a real and complex challenge. A challenge that needs to be tackled by a smart approach needs to pay exact attention to mitigate the digital divide between rural and urban areas and to develop the potential offered by connectivity and digitization of rural areas. Besides that, the need for integrated approaches and the complementarity and coherence interaction between different policy fields already emerged in this declaration. Throughout our common work, involving many publications, and the motivation of even more articles, we have always enjoyed inspiration from academics, from practitioners, and from a wide array of different stakeholders.

As generally perceived – and as we see it – this should be the role of Members of the European Parliament: representing the interest of the people, listening to their needs, translating, and further elaborating these needs with the help of the academics and practitioners. This assures that, at the end of the day, these new tools find their manifestation in (European) legislation. As politicians, we need to identify the needs that are important for future development. We must also acknowledge that many innovations here in Brussels are the results of input and feedback from our constituencies. Brussels has the potential to become a ‘European Silicon Valley’ not only at the legislative level. Read this book and you will become more familiar also with the process of idea-to-legislation practices.

Revitalizing rural communities and making them more attractive and sustainable is possible by using the full potential of information and communication technology. We believe that offering business opportunities, making rural areas more attractive for investors, and enabling farmers and other local actors to use their potential are the key to build successful rural communities. But the story cannot stop here; it is visible that more work needs to be done on this field and hopefully we will all have the opportunity to continue this useful and expected complex development approach.

We are personally satisfied, as over the past five years, our efforts as Members of the European Parliament were focused on building consensus around the necessity of rural areas and rural communities. We are grateful for the support we have received from several EU Commissioners in office, as well as from their Directorate-Generals, with our special thanks being extended to Mr Phil Hogan, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development, and to the colleagues from DG AGRI.

We are equally grateful to all the outstanding authors of this book for their time and dedication, and especially to Dr Anna Visvizi, Dr Miltiadis D. Lytras and Mr György Mudri, the book Editors, for being the engines of this project!

Please read this excellent book, and join us in the effort to make rural areas truly successful again!

*Tibor Szanyi and Franc Bogovic
Members of the European Parliament
Initiators of the Smart Villages' Projects in the European Parliament*