EUROPEAN WEEK of Regions & Cities

Strong Regions, Strong Europe



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From grassroots innovation to EU policy: governance pathways linking local action and European strategies

The SMART ERA project: how can communities turn digital innovation into solutions for local challenges?

Matteo Gerosa, FBK, SMART ERA project coordinator





The SMART ERA project

Horizon Europe

- Smart solutions for smart rural communities: empowering rural communities and smart villages to innovate for societal change
- Through processes of co-design, co-development and co-validation of innovative solutions

4 years

- January 2024 -> December 2027

Consortium

- 25 partner/affiliated entities from 10 EU countries

Budget

- € 6 861 437.50 (around 1 Million Euro FSTP)

From isolated solutions...

Sample challenge
Offer new mobility services

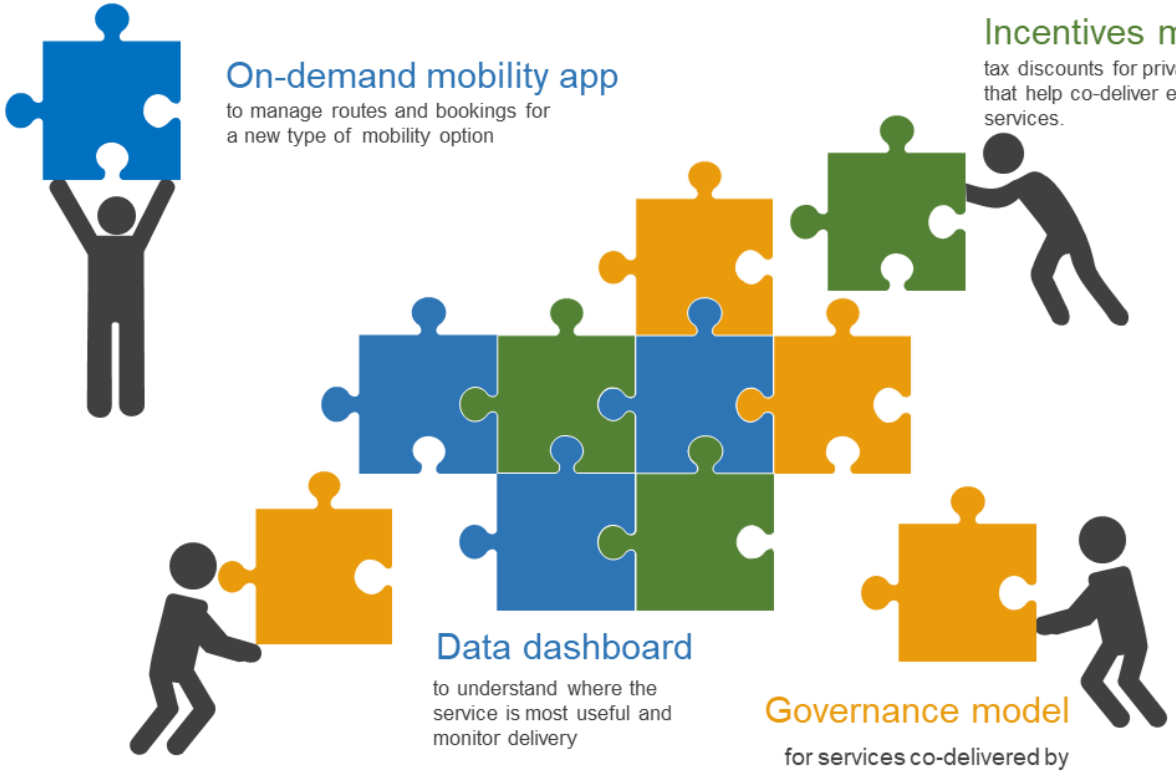


On-demand mobility app
to manage routes and bookings for a new type of mobility option



-> to Smart Innovation Packages

Sample challenge
Offer new mobility services



On-demand mobility app
to manage routes and bookings for a new type of mobility option

Incentives model
tax discounts for private parties that help co-deliver essential services.

Data dashboard
to understand where the service is most useful and monitor delivery

Governance model
for services co-delivered by PAs and private actors.

Community engagement and co-design techniques
to involve the community in the creation and management of the SIP.

- Technological solutions
- Non-technological solutions
- Business models and policies

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Participatory methods and co-design

Capacity building

- Empowering groups of local stakeholders and guiding them through the process

Collective intelligence

- Workshops, focus groups, interviews to ensure that solutions answer to real and specific needs

Social inclusion

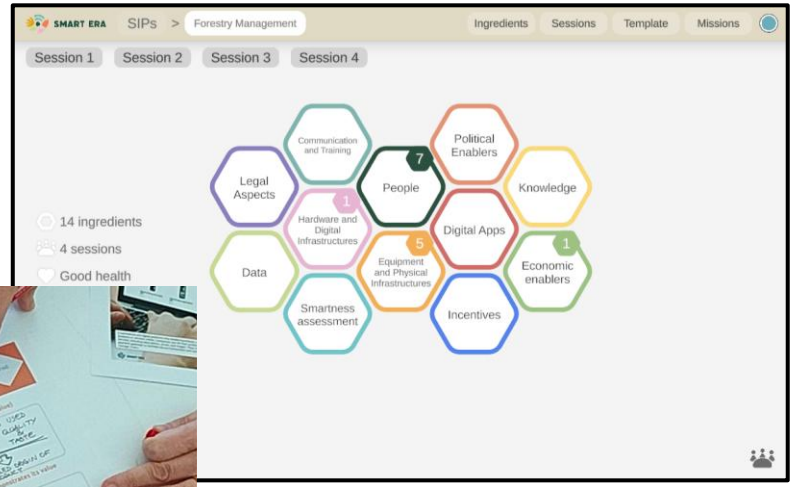
- Involving different categories of people, including groups that might be under-represented in decision-making processes

Technology co-design

- Involving end-users in technology design makes solutions more flexible and sustainable in the long term



SMART ERA “phygital” toolkit









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Empowerment of rural communities in a stronger Smart Village network

Community empowerment through smart solutions

- Technology co-design
- SIP deployed and tested in local pilot sites during the project
- Business model for SIPs: crucial focus of the project to ensure sustainability after project's end
- FSTP: 11 projects to provide innovative solution for pilot areas
- Intensive support program to ensure connection with local ecosystem

Transferring and scaling successful local approaches across territories

- Study visits, shared methodologies and sessions between pilot areas
- SIP components (and user stories) shared between regions
- Developing a Policy toolkit to help local stakeholder develop new policies to foster their local goals
- 2° Open Call: followers regions
- Adding four new regions: consortia of 2 entities in 4 EU macroregional strategies areas

SMART ERA: contribution to EU Policies

Emerging policy recommendations

✓ Digital transformation works when **embedded in local ecosystems**, not as standalone tech

✓ **Capacity-building and governance** matter as much as infrastructure

✓ Replication requires **packaging solutions**, not individual pilots

✓ Data can create **public value**, but needs local ownership and usability

Point of contact with AG5

- **Digital transformation:** community-driven, place-based innovation
- **Digital infrastructures:** connecting solutions to real service delivery
- **Data & AI:** turning local data into actionable public value

How SMART ERA feeds EU policies

Right to Stay Strategy (adoption expected Q4 2026)

Smart Innovation Packages make staying a real choice: rural services, mobility and jobs co-designed with residents

Long-term Vision for Rural Areas & **Rural Pact**

Pilot results and the policy toolkit feed the Rural Pact community and a stronger Smart Village network

Digital Decade 2030

Community-led digital services and skills bring Digital Decade targets to rural territories

Cohesion Policy & macro-regional strategies

Follower regions in 4 macro-regional areas test SIP transfer, informing place-based funding after 2027

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Take-home message

SMART ERA demonstrates that **smart innovation is not simply about deploying technology**, but about **enabling communities** to identify their challenges, co-design appropriate solutions and build the capacity to act.

Technology does not transform territories. ***Communities transform territories*** *using technology as an enabler.*



Thank you!

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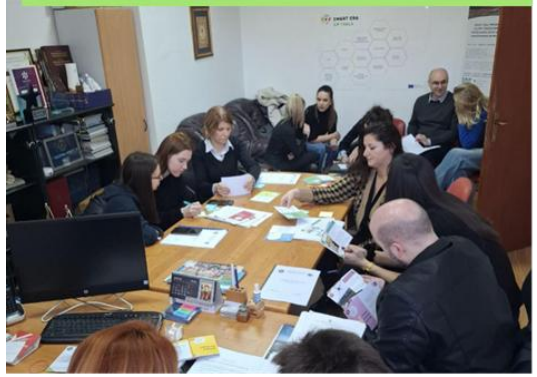
Sóller, Mallorca (ESP)



Northern Ostrobothnia (FIN)



Trebinje, East Herzegovina (BIH)



Šmarje - Padna (SVN)



Devetaki Plateau (BG)



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