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Highlights report

Strengthening digital skills of rural people to benefit from the digital era

Summary

This Good Practice Webinar organised by the Rural Pact Support Office (RPSO) brought together around 60 practitioners from 20 EU and four non-EU Member States. It offered the opportunity to learn from experiences and initiatives that boost digital skills development in rural areas. Also, participants exchanged about the main success factors and challenges in the design and implementation of digital skills initiatives and drew recommendations for policy makers and practitioners wishing to take action in this field.

Organiser: Rural Pact Support Office

🗓 8 June 2023

📍 Online

👥 60 participants (local practitioners, researchers, public authorities, advisors, business, producers, other EU-funded projects, etc.)

💻 Presentations & recordings (here)

🎥 If you see this icon, click to watch the recording

Funded by the European Union

Setting the scene: EU initiatives to foster digital skills in rural areas

What is the Rural Pact and where do digital skills fit in the rural vision?

Alexia Rouby (DG AGRI) introduced the Rural Pact as a key flagship initiative of the European Commission to involve a wide range of stakeholders in the implementation of the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA). The Rural Pact aims to bring up key rural concerns on the policy agendas, encourage networking, boost collaboration and mutual learning, and foster commitments from stakeholders to act in favour of rural areas. She presented the updated state of the Rural Pact Community: by June 2023 there were over 1 85 0 members of the Community, and over 115 stakeholders have made a specific commitment to act for Europe's rural areas.

Skills for the Digital Transition

Ana Carrero (DG EMPL) introduced some of the key EU initiatives of digital skills. In particular, she mentioned that 2023 is the European Year of Skills and that digital skills will play an important role. A key policy driving action is the European skills agenda which plans 12 actions covering all skills dimensions, including digital skills. Linked to this agenda, the Osnabrück declaration endorsed by all Member States puts the focus on modernising Vocational Educational and Training to support the digital transition. In addition, the Pact for Skills was put in place to build large scale partnerships on specific sectors to commit to reskilling and upskilling the workforce, adapting them to the new needs. Another initiative is the Digital Skills & Jobs Platform which offers a wide variety of information and resources (e.g. the Digital Skills Assessment Tool), matched with interactive spaces for the public and private actors interested on digital skills. Finally, the Digital Competences Framework plays a key role in providing a basis for framing digital skills policies, curricula development and assessment of digital skills, both in the education sphere and for the labour market.

Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027

Anusca Ferrari (DG EAC) introduced the Digital Education Action Plan 2021-2027 which aims to boost high quality and inclusive digital education and training (geographical and people at risk of exclusion) across Europe. It offers actionable opportunities to support initiatives through various EU funds such as Erasmus+, Horizon Europe, Digital Europe Programme, Connecting Europe Facility, etc. The Action Plan includes 14 actions across three priorities: fostering digital ecosystems, enhancing digital skills and boosting cooperation through the Digital Education Hub.

The Hub was launched in 2022 and is an online community to engage with experts interested in digital education from all levels of education. She outlined in particular 2 key actions implemented by the European Commission. First, the Commission held structured dialogues with Member States on digital education and skills which highlighted the need to work on this topic across government departments (infrastructure, education, agriculture, etc). The second action referred to supporting connectivity and digital equipment for education, particularly in schools , which is a specific challenge in rural areas. This is supported through competitive calls under the Connecting Europe Facility for schools and municipalities to benefit from. Finally, she highlighted that the proposal for a Council Recommendation on improving the provision of digital skills in education and training was developed by the European Commission to empower Europeans to develop basic, intermediate and advanced digital skills through education and training.

Learning from inspirational projects and practices

Regional strategy for digital skills

Gianluca Vannuccini, (CIO Tuscany Region, Italy) introduced the regional strategy for digital skills in Tuscany (Italy). It aims to connect and build synergies among all existing governmental initiatives supporting digital skills. It is based on four axes related to i) digital citizenship, ii) digital skills for a better economy, iii) digital education and iv) advanced digital skills. The strategy implements multiple actions supported by several funding sources (including EU funds). Coordination across government departments is crucial and ensured through a permanent working group that supports the implementation of the strategy. A key action of the strategy is the creation of a network of digital centres (169 by 2026) with certified digital facilitators to support citizens and businesses, with a specific focus on the inner areas of Tuscany. The strategy aspires to create specialised digital professional profiles for key sectors such as agriculture, fashion, mechanics, etc. to boost these economic sectors.

No one behind: Digital skills for adults in rural areas

Ciprian Barsan (Eco Land Association) introduced the No one behind project supported by Erasmus + which addressed digital skills for adults in rural areas. He outlined that this population faces difficulties in developing digital skills, which hinders their social and economic integration in today's digital world. This is more prominent in Eastern European countries. The project aimed to provide training and support to enhance digital skills among adults in rural communities. It developed specific training modules that bring relevant information together with the use of simple language. Also, they developed an educational online game for active learning.

Supporting the inclusion of seniors in rural digital communities

Hugrún Harpa (Nyheimar Knowledge Center) introduced the Erasmus+ project Digital Communities. It supports the inclusion of seniors in rural digital communities. Seniors need to acquire digital skills as public services disappear or are provided digitally. The project developed training and virtual tools for rural communities in four countries based on the specific needs of the seniors in relation to use of particular digital public services. She stressed that in the digital era, digital service providers should strengthen their support to help the senior population to be more inclusive. There is a need for broad cooperation between service providers and social services and institutions which are connected with seniors and can support them in their learning path.

## Remote rural schools as learning hubs of the rural community

Nikos Zygouritsas (Ellinogermaniki Agogi) introduced the preparatory action 'Learning from extremes' supported by the European Commission. It aims to address inequalities of access to digital education by enhancing inclusion and by reducing the digital gap suffered by school communities from remote areas with low connectivity, limited or no access to devices and digital educational tools and content. It is implemented with the notion that rural schools can act as learning and innovation hubs for social engagement and development. More than 123 schools from 10 Member States are participating in this initiative. They support schools in their journey assessing their needs through self-reflection tools, designing their development plans, and working with teachers and students in the implementation of school projects, which are also relevant for the local community as a whole. Schools act as information hubs for learning and engage local families, companies, industry, experts, universities, etc.

Read the collection of initiatives shared during the webinar.

Panel of experts 🎥 & Group Discussion 🎥

Key success factors, challenges, and lessons learned from inspiring initiatives

A panel of experts composed of Luka Orehar (Agrinext, Erasmus +), Maria Rita Palattella (COMMECT, Horizon Europe), Jose Manuel San Emeterio (ERNACT, Donegal Digital, Ireland) and Brigita Dane (Symbioza, Slovenia) reflected on the key main success factors and challenges when implementing digital skills initiatives as well as on key lessons learned from their experiences.
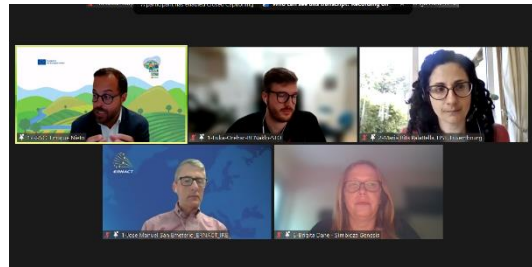
This initial exchange provided useful input for three group discussions. The main messages that emerged from this session are summarised below:

> **Digital connectivity, skills and equipment are three key elements to ensure digital transition.** One should not go without the others and all digital initiatives should build synergies between these elements. It is key to articulate projects and initiatives that ensure communities are equipped with the needed infrastructure and skills to benefit from the digital era.

> **Digital skills initiatives should be inclusive and address local needs.** Top-down standard training programmes which are not adapted to local contexts tend to fail and do not trigger the interest of the community to enrol in them. It is essential to design initiatives that take into account the potential use of the skills acquired and based as well on the locally available technologies and development needs. The implementation of a bottom-up and tailor-made approaches to build digital skills initiatives involving the local community and tune them with the local context (e.g. through Living Labs) has been identified as a suitable approach.

> **Show the added value and benefits of digitalisation to ensure engagement and participation.** It is a fundamental step that needs to be incorporated in any digital skills initiatives to ensure the meaningful participation of the local actors. It aims at changing the mindset of the end-users towards using and investing in digital technologies, which is recognised to be a very challenging aspect in local initiatives. Project holders might find some reluctancy from end-users in paying the cost of digitalisation if the added value is not clear for them. A number of approaches were highlighted to address this important aspect:

- Start small, convincing and **involving leading actors (or pioneers), intermediate organisations and structures** (such as digital hubs, advisory services, etc.) from the community and who might act as role models and motivate others in the community to acquire digital skills.

- Use **practical and concrete examples to show the benefits that acquiring the skills** for the use of a particular technology would have directly on end users, moving from theory to practice.

- Use **community-based approaches to help in sharing costs of digitalisation and skills acquisition** related to specific technologies (e.g. a community could share the costs of a common website to promote and organise collective tourism activities in rural areas – e.g. visit to vineyards).

> **The power of simplified communication.** The use of simple language and tools which translate complex technical digital jargon into an understandable language for actors show more positive results in terms of engagement and application of the skills acquired (in particularly when involving the more senior population). The use of the local languages is a must to simplify communication (rather than English manuals).

> **The acquisition of digital skills is a process that takes time and should be ongoingly supported and formally recognised.** The needs of citizens and businesses will evolve over time and so the needs for upskilling, or reskilling their digital competences, too. Also, the formal recognition by public authorities of the skills acquired (e.g. though certificates) is a key motivational factor for participants to engage in digital skills initiatives.

> **Public and private digital service providers should play a more active role in facilitating skills acquisition of vulnerable groups**. Particularly with the elderly communities, providers of new essential digital services should provide user-friendly services and offer direct assistance (often direct person-to-person support) to those social cohorts in need of support and ensure no one is left behind (e.g. online banking, online shopping, e-health services, etc).

> **Policies and funding for supporting digital skills need to better connect with rural areas and their needs.** Rural communities find difficulties in identifying or understanding whether rural areas are candidates to apply to the many calls for projects and funding on this subject. It was highlighted that the requirements to apply for these available calls are not proportionate to the capacities of rural communities, hence hampering their capacity to apply.

> Successful policies supporting digital skills show the need to put in place **governance structures that enable joint work across government departments** (e.g. education, health, agriculture, etc) in the planning, design, implementation and monitoring of coordinated actions that support digitalisation in the territory, including digital infrastructures and skills.

More information from group discussions is available on the whiteboards uploaded on the website.

Join the Rural Pact Community and online platform
https://ruralpact.rural-vision.europa.eu/become-member_en

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