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More than a Village

# JOINT STRATEGY REPORT

Joint strategy for smart village  
transition in Central Europe



# JOINT STRATEGY REPORT FOR SMART VILLAGE TRANSITION IN CENTRAL EUROPE

An analytical framework to assist smart village initiatives to support development of rural areas in Central Europe

## Document information

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## A. Introduction

The objective of the “More than a village” project is to test and develop different models of a smart village in the Central Europe region context that will increase the attractiveness of rural areas and create favourable conditions for local businesses. The project's innovation lies in the innovativeness of its smart village approach which is still not widespread in Central Europe.

The main project's outputs are: 1) joint strategy on smart village transition, followed by action plans for selected territories, 2) three pilot actions consisting of testing different smart village models, 3) joint solutions to be applied in rural areas in CE and beyond. The overall aim of the activities of both the Joint Strategy and the interlinked Action Plans is to create feasible and actual change in the rural areas of the project, in terms of practical and tangible transition actions that respond to the needs of the local population, and are able to do so within the time limits of More than a Village.

In order to be able to achieve the goals proposed in the project, in order to support rural communities in applying innovative solutions, digital technologies and also better knowledge transfer to overcome economic and social problems, the MTAV project proposes an approach that focuses on identifying and utilizing the local assets of rural regions to increase their development, to improve their attractiveness and competitiveness. Each area has challenges that it must overcome. For example, some villages have relatively developed agriculture as their strength, so smart agriculture will be a great opportunity for them. Other villages have unique natural and cultural resources and are suitable for smart rural tourism. Still others are characterized by a good entrepreneurial base and numerous local SMEs which represent an opportunity for rural e-commerce development.

The integrated approach to be developed in the project can be replicated and applied in different contexts through the establishment of a common strategy for all stakeholders. With this objective, the project “More Than a Village” not only tests and evaluates, but also aims to strengthen the capacities of our target groups to develop rural regions and improve their competitiveness and attractiveness of our target

groups to develop rural regions and improve their competitiveness and attractiveness through the preparation of solutions and their further implementation in other areas.

The diversity of partner countries in the project (PL, HU, SI, HR and IT) in terms of socio-economic, spatial and population structure will help to test project in different environments and develop a model of a smart village that will be suited for each specific feature of rural regions. Moreover, the project will facilitate the support for peer-to-peer exchange, networking and cooperation amongst PPs and external target groups in the central Europe area, as these can be important vehicles of knowledge sharing and innovation.

## **B. The story so far - main lessons learnt: Final Report**

Building on the results and conclusions of the work conducted in More than a Village's Work Package 1 (WP1 - Building a joint approach and strategy for making villages smarter), important reflections emerge on the main priorities that the different Pilot Areas set for themselves (see below for details on the specific activities), on the main good practices and tools selected to implement such actions, and on the drafting of specific Action Plans to this very end, but also on how the choice of the Pilot Areas for the project certainly determined the assessment and identification of stakeholders for each individual sector, ranging from Public Administration to Private Entities, Universities or Research Centres as well as NGOs and Non-profit Associations.

An analysis of the Best Practices and lessons learned shows the importance of the involvement of the citizens of the areas/villages or pilot areas involved in every stage of the project, from assessment to project planning and implementation. Residents have knowledge that those who do not live in a given place do not have. Therefore, also an active involvement and cooperation between stakeholders, including local authorities, educational institutions, experts, but also the villagers themselves, ensure the successful implementation of the smart village strategy.

The partners' choice of stakeholders shows that most of them identified public and private entities, local entrepreneurs and third sector companies. Only one partner, ANCI Liguria, favoured the sector of NGOs and Associations or Non-profit Organisations

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scattered throughout the territory as they are the main actors in the territory and therefore can make a great contribution to the project and at the same time can be helped and supported by the project know-how. These choices lead to the inference that most partners focused, as agreed in the project's outline and application form, on introducing real and concrete smart change, as defined below.

The Regional Stakeholder Groups (RSGs), organised in each of the pilot areas, expressed their ideas in terms of "contributions, constraints, and interests."

The pilot areas mentioned before are:

- I. **LAG South Warmia:** the pilot area has been identified in one of the rural municipalities, exactly in the municipality of Purda, in the village of Marcinkowo. Marcinkowo - a village in Poland, Warmia-Mazury Voivodeship, Olsztyn County, Purda Municipality, located 12 km from the provincial capital, Olsztyn. The main objective is the creation of a Smart Village Centre in Marcinkowo, called Smart Village Hub (SVH), where extensive support will be provided to the inhabitants not only of Marcinkowo but also of the whole area, especially in the field of SME and NGO creation and development. Special attention will be paid to young people and the elderly. SVH will provide assistance in the creation of the Smart Village concept and its implementation, as well as combating exclusions (digital, communication, economic, social, etc.).
- II. **HBCG:** The Hungarian pilot area identified in Hajdú-Bihar County wants to bring a digital improvement of rural areas and small villages in this area, focusing mainly on the people living in these areas, not only to put the county on the map, but also to actively utilize the potential of the Silver Economy for the 55+ (60+?) age group.
- III. **ITC:** the pilot area in the Pomurje region will be based on the development and enhancement of an approach to reduce food loss and waste in the agri-food value chain through the creation of a supported innovation system. ITC will focus its activities using the fully operational short food supply chain called Green Point.
- IV. **City of Buzet:** the pilot action for City of Buzet will be the development of the web agri-food web platform where local producers could sell and advertise their products, gather useful information on novelties in agriculture and also track conditions of the meteorological data with the stations that will be

installed during the project. Web platform will also be useful for regular customers and people with small private gardens where they can order and pick up products they don't grow, gather information on soil status and many other useful information to help them grow organic food and also to get some news, offers in the area, new technologies in agriculture etc. Implementation of the web platform, better placement of agricultural products and much information about agriculture along with the measurement of soil status with lots of other meteorological data will be a basis for development of agriculture using new technologies.

- V. **ANCI Liguria:** the pilot area will be developed in the Val Polcevera area, one of the main valleys in the Genoese area. Upper Polcevera valley is divided between the municipalities of Ceranesi, Campomorone, Mignanego, Sant'Olcese and Serra Riccò. This is a territory with varied characteristics, in some parts more 'city-like' and in others typically Apennine, with aspects that are still rich in vegetation and wildlife habitats, which in some areas recall the realities of many Alpine areas in our country. The action plan is developed along two different lines:

1) Identifying a space a space of the Campomorone Library or near it to organize a co-working space equipped with a projector, screen, PC etc, equipment made available by the MTAV project (7500.00 euro) start bringing the idea of the innovation hub to the area and to facilitate the use of a co-working space by economic subjects, resident citizens and visiting citizens such as tourists passing through or temporarily staying in the area.

2) Develop an interactive video to promote co-working activities and also to give useful info about what happens in the Upper Alta Valpocevera to citizens and tourists. The video will also promote enterprises and other economic and touristic activities.

Having different backgrounds, know-how and objectives precisely because of their different functions in society, they were able to bring different and intersecting perspectives as well as suggestions. Most of them are interested in new economic and business opportunities and also in a new link between rural-urban policy and rural-urban citizenship, which is one of the key objectives of More than a Village. Their **contributions and interests** specifically, mostly relate to investments in local agriculture and tourism, while also focusing on creating better conditions for farmers



and entrepreneurs, seeking to better understand the needs and problems of businesses and constantly updating them on the topic of local tourism (and more in general, economic) development. They also emphasised the need to define a constant updating of citizens on tourism and agricultural developments in their area by entrepreneurs and farmers, in order to have a more integrated and innovative economic sector, including tourism and agriculture, in different local areas.

In terms of **constraints**, the stakeholders highlighted how the potential lack of funding sources currently available, the lack of collaboration between municipalities and between local and regional authorities are obstacles that are not easy to overcome, but that represent a key element, 'integration element' to be precise, of the present Joint Strategy. Furthermore, it emerged that most stakeholders are interested in new technological concepts, new business opportunities and cooperation in a multi-actor environment, for the improvement of the economy and also in order to increase the attractiveness of their rural areas.

The analysis of the Partners' proposed **Best Practices** shows that some of the 6 dimensions of smartness (Economy, Environment, Governance, Living, Mobility, People), as defined in the smartness assessment approach developed in the literature<sup>1</sup> and applied also in More than a Villages, were considered the most important. In particular, the Economy dimension, as expected, had the greatest impact from the Good Practices proposed and in general for the areas of the project, followed by the dimension of People, Governance and Living, which are closely connected and are perfectly tuned with the rationale that the present Joint Strategy is built upon. Regarding the examples of Good Practices proposed and activated in the specific project areas, these could be very useful as examples both in terms of the **implementation of a system of networks** on the territory for the activation of promotion and training services for the development of sustainable experiential tourism, respecting communities and the heritage of specific traditions, and in terms of **improving the economic outline of rural areas**, where a transition and digital accessibility of communities could be developed through an increase of their attractiveness, the creation of jobs and the reduction of territorial inequalities.

Moreover, in line with what emerged from the analysis of the Good Practices, the collection of **Existing tools and their solutions** has underscored the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-30278-8\\_48](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-30278-8_48)

implementing the Smart Villages approach, i.e., a cooperative and participatory approach aiming to a smart transition, in different aspects depending on the activity described, aimed at improving not only economic but also social and environmental conditions, through digital and innovative solutions, but also through more traditional solutions such as the involvement of citizens and local stakeholders, and last but not least, solutions involving public and private actors. In order to disseminate and apply these models in the different project areas, it will be necessary to raise awareness among citizens, public administrations, and public and private stakeholders with respect to initiatives involving the local area.

## C. The Joint Strategy - the EU discourse on smarter rural areas and the Integration rationale within More than a Village

Placing itself in the EU-wide context of smarter and more sustainable rural areas, and building on the outcomes and results of several EU-co funded projects, strategies and plans, the overall aim of **Interreg Central Europe More than a Village** is to work in the context of acknowledging and countering the so-called “**Circle of Decline**” of rural and mountain areas as it is defined and recognized by the European Union, with a specific focus on the rural areas in the project, spanning from Poland to Slovenia, from Italy to Croatia to Hungary.

Among the several EU co-funded projects that have contributed in creating the knowledge base on which More than a Village builds, it is important to recall **Interreg Alpine Space INTESI**<sup>2</sup> (Integrated territorial strategies for Services of General Interest, 2015-2018), **Interreg Alpine Space SmartVillages**<sup>3</sup> (Smart digital transformation of villages in the Alpine Space, 2018-2021), **Interreg Europe P-IRIS**<sup>4</sup> (Policies to improve rural areas' innovation systems by professionalising networking activities and use of innovation tools, 2017-2021), and the ongoing projects **Interreg Alpine Space SmartCommUnity**<sup>5</sup> (Building on the concept of Smart Villages towards

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/intesi/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/smartvillages/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://projects2014-2020.interregeurope.eu/p-iris/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.alpine-space.eu/project/smartcommunity/>

a transnational and EUSALP-integrated Smart Community in the Alps, 2022-2025) and *Horizon Europe Smart ERA*<sup>6</sup> (SMART community-led transition for Europe's Rural Areas, 2024-2027). The present **Joint Strategy** builds on the main findings of the aforementioned projects and is constructed via the main results, outcomes and experiences coming from the first year and the first WP of More than a Village, as described in the previous chapter.

As already defined within INTESI in its work on the provision of services of general interest to mountain areas, the Circle of Decline of rural and mountain areas can be defined as including out-migration, mostly of the younger generations (with a corresponding ageing of the remaining population); a subsequent low population density; the lack of a critical mass of people for services and infrastructure; lower rate of business creation and innovation; fewer jobs. The latter rekindles the Circle of Decline itself, creating even fewer opportunities for local people and further diminishing the overall attractiveness of rural areas. The Circle of Decline rationale identifies two main interconnected reinforcing trends: a shortage of jobs and sustainable business opportunities and inadequate and declining basic services to the population, affecting the vitality and attractiveness of rural areas. Some of these aspects, mostly those related to the lack of jobs and attractiveness of rural areas, as well as the resulting lack of opportunities and the bleak economic outline, have emerged as such within the first year of More than a Village.

Over the last few years the EU has increasingly focused on how to improve the conditions of rural (including mountain) areas in several dedicated documents. The **Cork 2.0 declaration *A better life in rural areas***<sup>7</sup> (2016) focused on strengthening emerging business opportunities, on new approaches to integration and on self-sustaining initiatives for a competitive and diversified economy. The subsequent **EU Action for Smart Villages**<sup>8</sup> (2017) highlighted the need to enable new business models, to assist existing businesses to emerge, to integrate services and to cooperate better with urban-based businesses. On the same track, the **Bled Declaration**<sup>9</sup> (2018) identified some technological achievements to inspire innovation in SGI provision in mountain areas, among which digital platforms offering all essential services, such as

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/101084160>

<sup>7</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/cork-declaration\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/sites/default/files/cork-declaration_en.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/rur-dev-small-villages\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/rur-dev-small-villages_en_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> <https://pametne-vasi.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Bled-declaration-for-a-Smarter-Future-of-the-Rural-Areas-in-EU.pdf>

e-learning, e-health, e-administration, transport, social services. A strong focus of both initiatives, in this sense, is on the digitisation of rural areas, both in terms of providing equal digital infrastructure to non-urban areas, and in terms of increasing the digital literacy of rural and mountain areas.

In more recent years, in this sense the number of EU initiatives, plans and strategies dedicated to enable rural and mountain areas to take full advantage of the opportunities belied by ICT and digital innovation has significantly expanded and increased. A dedicated *Smart Villages task force and working group*<sup>10</sup> (2017-2020) was created within the *European Network for Rural Development*, that focused on the intersections between digital innovation and spatial planning in the context of agricultural development, on the gaps in digitisation both in terms of infrastructure, coverage and digital literacy and skills, which are of course key for rural and mountain areas, whereas in 2021 the EU has launched its *Long-term vision for rural areas*<sup>11</sup>, that includes a *Rural Pact* and a *Rural Action Plan*, and that focuses strongly on the emerging opportunities of the EU's green and digital transitions and on the lessons learnt from the COVID 19 pandemic for the rural areas of the continent. The Vision aims at rural areas that are stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous, with the 'connected' aim covering both physical and digital accessibility. In 2020, the *EU 2030 Territorial Agenda*<sup>12</sup> also declared its scope of an action-oriented framework to promote territorial cohesion in Europe, a future for all places, including Action Plans for specific territories.

Even more recently, the EU discourse on smarter and more sustainable rural areas has seen the launch of the *Rural Toolkit*<sup>13</sup> (2024), that focuses on policies at all levels to enable a smart transition for rural, including mountain, areas, the *Rural Observatory*<sup>14</sup>, that aims at improving data collection and dissemination related to EU rural areas, offering relevant statistics, indicators and analyses based on data from multiple sources and at the most appropriate territorial granularity, covering the economic, social and environmental dimensions, and even a *European Startup*

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<sup>10</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages\\_en.html](https://ec.europa.eu/enrd/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages_en.html)

<sup>11</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/regional\\_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/06/30-06-2021-long-term-vision-for-rural-areas-for-stronger-connected-resilient-prosperous-eu-rural-areas](https://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/en/newsroom/news/2021/06/30-06-2021-long-term-vision-for-rural-areas-for-stronger-connected-resilient-prosperous-eu-rural-areas)

<sup>12</sup> <https://territorialagenda.eu/>

<sup>13</sup> [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP\\_24\\_656](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_24_656)

<sup>14</sup> [https://rural-vision.europa.eu/maps-data\\_en](https://rural-vision.europa.eu/maps-data_en)

*Village Forum*<sup>15</sup>, part of the EU Vision for rural areas, that facilitates the exchange of knowledge and expertise on how to promote startup-driven innovation in rural areas.

Building on such a rich context of projects and initiatives, and on the basis of the work performed within More than a Village's **Work Package 1**, dedicated to ***Building a joint approach and strategy for making villages smarter***, the project partners' have decided to structure the Joint Strategy on a clear and well defined rationale that is both common to all previous initiatives, plans and strategies, and that has emerged clearly from the Regional Stakeholder Groups' meetings in the project, and to use a well-defined definition of its scope, that will be described in the following.

In terms of cascading definitions, the More than a Village **Joint Strategy** wants to be **a feasible transnational strategy to enable effective change, in terms of a smart transition, at local level**. **Change** can be defined as concrete smart transition actions with measurable positive effects for the local population. **Feasible** can be defined as a combination of i) desirable by the local population + ii) politically and financially viable + iii) technically feasible. **Transnational** can be defined as i) having an overarching international character + ii) having local positive impacts.

The **integration rationale** is proposed as a comprehensive strategic theme for the Joint Strategy: as a concept, integration covers the vertical and horizontal levels in policy making, the elements of integration (the building blocks in the implementation of change), and will lead to the Action Plans, which embody the actual implementation and the concrete steps of the Joint Strategy. The Action Plans, as a self-standing set of deliverables, also represent a strongly connected part and output of the Joint Strategy itself.

More in detail, the **integration rationale** needs to be assured between different policy levels existing in the More than a Village's territories (**vertical** integration) and between actors and decision makers working at the same level (**horizontal** integration). Beyond the policy level (which represents the political feasibility of change), other **elements of practical integration** that need to be considered are: i) the inclusion of all relevant actors, coming from business, academia and the civil society; ii) the search for all possible financial sources; iii) the inclusion of all services and sectors (that enable the technical feasibility of change). At the same time the

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<sup>15</sup> [https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/european-startup-village-forum\\_en](https://joint-research-centre.ec.europa.eu/scientific-activities-z/european-startup-village-forum_en)



concrete steps towards change via integration include i) the assessment of main needs and priorities (the smartness assessment methodology), ii) the awareness raising and collaborative meetings of stakeholders, iii) the actual operationalisation and Implementation of the action for change, that is the specific Action Plans.

The Joint Strategy belies a process that is **iterative**, since all steps can lead to each other, especially if re-directions or corrections are needed and **incremental**. All elements and steps, and the links between the Joint Strategy and the Action Plans, will be further described and expanded in the following chapters.

## D. The Joint Strategy - vertical and horizontal integration of policy levels for effective change

According to the main findings of the Interreg Alpine project INTESI, that ushered the historically relevant series of projects dedicated to smarter and more sustainable rural and mountain areas, *“An integrated territorial strategy for SGI (Services of General Interest) is a strategy for the SGI provision based on four main principles: **quality, availability, affordability, and accessibility**, which takes into account peoples’ actual and future needs in a given territory, territorial dimension, and the benefits of the synergies among the different SGI sectors. With “action plan”, we refer to an instrument that makes the strategy operative with detailed and concrete actions in a shorter time span, and that can be developed and adopted by different authorities depending on the case.”*

Treasuring this definition and the four pillars it is based on, and moving beyond the mere scope dedicated to the provision of SGI that was the cornerstone of INTESI, More than a Village’s Joint Strategy focuses on a **tailored approach to integration** that includes a strong focus on elements for integration of policy levels and concrete steps towards integration, with the declared aim that such integration could more seamlessly **facilitate a feasible change in the More than a Village pilot areas**.

Concentrating on the integration among policy levels, the integration that has been encouraged and fostered in More than a Village’s pilot areas can be further described

as either **horizontal** or **vertical**. Horizontal integration includes the common work between policy makers at the same administrative level (e.g. municipalities in rural areas that cooperate, regions/counties that cooperate, ...) which is particularly relevant in the More than a Village project, where the pilot areas themselves are often composed by more than one administrative entity and where horizontal integration and cooperation among peers is particularly crucial. Horizontal integration is also recommended by the smart-villages-dedicated policies listed in chapter B, since rural and mountain areas often lack the critical mass (of people and of expertise, not to mention services or businesses) to be able to tackle complex decisions towards smarter and more sustainable development, and also to compete with urban areas to attract more talent and, in general, more people (and, as a matter of consequence, more services and business).

One of the key aspects of the present Joint Strategy is, therefore, the horizontal integration of policy levels in the project's pilot areas. Several are the possible participation methodologies to create such horizontal integration, but they all focus on structured meetings between policy makers and stakeholders that, in a clear framework, decide to work towards a common goal to enhance synergies and overcome localisms and other hurdles. The structured dialogical process to create an effective horizontal integration must be composed of stakeholders coming from different administrative units meeting to discuss common needs and common aims: the approach that was agreed upon in More than a Village, and is being applied by the Regional Stakeholder Groups in the pilot areas for such phase of the horizontal integration process has been that of a customised **Participation Learning for Action**<sup>16</sup>, with a focus on defining the community's **boundaries**, **values**, and in establishing **clarity of aim** and **cooperation**. The steps of such Participation Learning for Action have been those of a customised Oregon Model<sup>17</sup> for action, structured as a ladder of questions: i) where are we now?, ii) where are we going?, iii) where do we want to go?, iv) how do we get there?, and subsequently the monitoring and communication questions v) are we getting there? and vi) how are we communicating our work?

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<sup>16</sup> [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9\\_56](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-04394-9_56)

<sup>17</sup> <https://jfsdigital.org/articles-and-essays/2010-2/vol-15-no-2-december/symposium-guest-editor-jan-lee-martin/the-new-oregon-model-envision-plan-achieve/>

The Participation Learning for Action method is specifically designed to facilitate creative thinking, as well as to enable the assessment of the current situation, ongoing trends, and the definition of priorities and scenarios.

Such Participation Learning for Action has also been considered suitable when working towards the **vertical integration** of policy levels within More than a Village. The vertical integration of policy levels includes a further dimension of integration, in terms of cooperation between policy actors working at (international, when suitable), national, regional (or equivalent), county (or equivalent), and local levels with specific competencies for the same territory or, as far as More than a Village is concerned, for the same pilot area.

For rural areas it is of particular importance to become relevant, and heard, at all policy levels, and the contribution that the More than a Village Joint Strategy has provided for the project's pilot areas has been in the requirement, for the Regional Stakeholder Groups, to **include all relevant policy levels** that have competences on the same pilot area, mapping their respective competences, expectations, influence and power, both in terms of administration and decision making, and in terms of finances. Such mapping, done frankly and transparently in all Regional Stakeholder Groups, has allowed for a clearer definition of the current situation, the priorities and the opportunities for each pilot area, as well as for a clear definition of roles, possible conflicts and threats. The Participation Learning for Action, and the customised Oregon Model, can be applied also among different layers of policy levels, in combination with the aforementioned mapping of competences and roles, in order to set clearer and more achievable goals. As a further element of necessary integration, beyond the public sector and its key role at all policy levels, lie in the need for a competent and effective integration of the private sector, mostly in terms of facilitated and agile public-private partnerships. The integration of private actors, especially coming from the key business sectors that are active in rural areas (agri-food and tourism, but also energy production) is one of the core aspects of the Participatory Learning for Action approach and the Oregon Model.

Integration, as a cardinal rationale of the present More than a Village's Joint Strategy, can and should also go beyond the policy levels, and include **non-human elements** such as the **policies** themselves, the **available financial sources**, all **technological and equipment-related** elements, as well as, more in general, all types of necessary **data and indicators**.

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The number of elements to be integrated, from a more abstract point of view, defines the type of integration model that can be applied to a specific territory or, in More than a Village, to a specific pilot area: integration can concern more components of a single dimension (say, horizontal integration among policy actors, one element integrated - 1E) or a combination of multiple dimensions (2E, 3E, 4E and 5E models). In order to allow for an effective and feasible integration, it is important that the construction of a strategy takes place in a shared and structured way. The More than a Village Joint Strategy is, at minimum, a **3E integration model**, in which policy levels need to be combined with financial sources and, according to the specific action plans, to specific tangible elements to enable feasible changes at local level. In this sense, this is the quantitative aspect of integration that will be expected and monitored in the different Pilot Areas in the course of the implementation of the Action Plans, in agreement with the partners leading Work Packages and 3: more in detail the elements of integration will be assessed and monitored in all Pilot Areas.

All steps towards integration, the core of More than a Village's Joint Strategy, as described above and that will be further expanded in their most concrete part in the next chapter, can and should be considered as **iterative** and **recursive**, since they needn't be considered as finalised once and for all, but need to be open to changes, re-directions and modifications - this becomes particularly important in the implementation-section of the Joint Strategy, that is the specific Action Plans.

Although integration models are already present in strategic documents or regulations in all the project countries at various levels, the results reveal that the "declared" or de jure integration recognised in policy documents is often not transferred into an integrative approach in practice. **The scope of the present Joint Strategy is to represent an integrative approach in practice, and to facilitate an actual feasible change**, in terms of a smart transition action, in each of More than a Village's pilot areas.

## E. The Joint Strategy - elements of practical integration and the operationalisation of change: the ingredients of the Action Plans

The Joint Strategy is implemented and complemented by the **Action Plans**, namely Deliverable D.1.3.3 in the More than a Village work plan. The two deliverables are closely connected since a Strategy, arising from a more conceptual framework, finds its **concrete and effective implementation** in the formalisation (and of course, the operationalisation) of the Action Plans.

The More than a Village Action Plan deliverable has been conceived in two different layers: a **transnational layer**, covering the international aspects of the Strategy and its implementation and how the interregional knowledge exchange within the project can support the partners in the implementation of their smart transition actions, and a **local layer**, in which each Action Plan defines precisely how to implement the specific smart actions co-built by the partner and their Regional Stakeholder Groups.

In this sense, the Action Plans will be five different documents, one per each pilot area: South Warmia in Poland, Hajdú-Bihar in Hungary, Val Polcevera in Italy, Pomurje in Slovenia and Buzet in Croatia.

The common structure of the Action Plans is composed of seven sections, co-constructed by the partners with Poliedra, and with each section (from A to G) to be discussed and approved by the Regional Stakeholder Groups: at present, approaching the end of Semester 1 of the project and of the Work Package 1, in fact, each section of the Action Plans has been discussed, agreed upon and co-built with the Regional Stakeholder Groups, following the meetings to this end in the first six months of the project, but the finalisation of each Action Plan is ongoing.

**Section A**, in each of the local Action Plans, summarises the **core aspects of the smart transition actions** in each of the five territories, starting from the main agreements at the level of Regional Stakeholder Groups in terms of what action(s) to perform in the remaining two years of the More than a Village project. The specific actions selected by the partners and their local Regional Stakeholder Groups, that are



detailed in the specific Action Plans, are briefly summarised in the following per each pilot area:

- In **South Warmia, Poland**, the main goal of the action is to create a Smart Village Center in the village of Marcinkowo, called Smart Village Hub (SVH), where extensive support will be provided to the inhabitants of not only Marcinkowo but also the entire area, especially in the field of creation and development of SMEs and NGOs. Particular attention will be paid to young people and seniors. SVH will provide assistance in creating the Smart Village concept and in its implementation, as well as counteracting exclusions (digital, communication, economic, social, etc.).
- In **Hajdú-Bihar, Hungary**, the focus of the smart transition action is on the digital improvement of rural areas and small villages, focusing on the people living in these areas, not just to put the county 'on the map', but to create an ecosystem to support business and initiatives by people 50+ and actively utilising the silver economy potential for the 55+ (60+?) age group. Moreover, in order to boost the rural economy in Hajdú-Bihar, considering that the level of digital maturity in the rural areas of the county is very low, its improvement is essential for the wider deployment of smart solutions and for the real and long-term exploitation of the potential of the silver economy.
- In **Pomurje, Slovenia**, the smart transition action will be based on developing and enhancing an approach to reduce food loss and waste in the agri-food value chain, by establishing an innovation system supported. Partner ITC focuses its activities by using the fully operational short food supply chain called Green Point. The Green Point is operated as a living lab and has a long track record in promoting and engaging citizens in changing dietary habits, especially using locally produced healthy/sustainable food, while also empowering citizens to make sustainable choices through buying, cooking, treating and eating food.
- In **Buzet, Croatia**, the main goal of the local smart transition action is twofold: the enhancement of a local website dedicated to the promotion of local produce and local SMEs, as well as the installation of agrometeorological station for the monitoring of the local productions, to be linked to the aforementioned website.

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- In Val Polcevera, Italy, the core action is twofold: 1) Developing a community cooperative that can implement services to citizens to improve their quality of life in line with the smart village rationale; 2) Identifying a physical space to start bringing the idea of the innovation hub to the area and working on a strategy to develop sustainable tourism linked to culture and nature trails, centred particularly on the younger generations and families.

The core aspects of the smart transition actions included in this section refer to the territorial challenges and needs in the regions specifically addressed by the action, the main aim(s) of the action and how it contributes to tackle the identified challenge(s), the technical description of the action (e.g. scope, main features, innovative elements etc., and the results, as in the expected change and lasting effects in the territories generated specifically by the action, its uptake by relevant organisations and benefits for target groups. All the actions described above include the integration among policy levels, and the integration among elements, set in the presented Joint Strategy, and more specifically addressed in section B of each Action Plan.

**Section B**, in fact, encompasses a reasoned list of ‘ingredients’, or **integrated elements**, to build the recipe for the smart action foreseen in each of the five territories. Integrated elements may include data, maps, policies and engagement models for the local stakeholders (vertical and horizontal integration elements), finances, technical infrastructure, and so forth: the section gathers, in brief, the **toolbox to build a successful implementation of the smart action** in each of the pilot areas.

**Section C** of the Action Plans gets into details on **how and when the agreed integrated elements for the implementation of the action will be put into practice**. This section is being agreed both with the relevant partner and the Regional Stakeholder Group of the territory that works with the partner. The schedule is considered to be tentative, but will cover the remaining two years (and two WPs) of the project, and will also allow for any post-MTAV commitments.

**Section D** of the Action Plans details examples of possible **elements of risk in the implementation of the activities** in the five pilot areas, with a possible outline of remedial or reorientation actions to be taken. This section will be completed both with the relevant partner and after meeting with the five different territories, and its

initial input will come from a dedicated workshop to be held at the project meeting in Genoa, on March 13 2024.

The **main overall conclusions of the Action Plans** is drafted in **section E**: the overall conclusions have the form of the main **transnational aspects of the Action Plans**, with recommendations on how the MTAV transnational learning process can support the implementation of the five territorial smart actions.

In each of the Action Plans, **section F** includes **any possible further and complementary actions in each of the territories**, going beyond the MTAV Action Plan itself: further projects, future plans, complementary activities that can provide future/complementary changes in each of the MTAV territories. **Section G** includes some requirements regarding indirect state-aid rules and other project-related financial issues.

The **Action Plans** are considered **living documents throughout the More than a Village project**, hence the use of both present and future tenses in the previous description of each section. While finalised by the end of Semester 1, it is intended that the Action Plans will also be characterised by the **iterative and recursive nature of the process** described in this Joint Strategy: reorientations and rescheduling will be possible, since the whole process, faithful to its nature of integration among actors and elements, is not intended to be fixed once and for all. The agreed aim of the Strategy, and each of the Action Plans, is in any case **to provide each pilot areas, at the end of More than a Village, with the implementation of one concrete smart change that is beneficial to the local population, and that is easy to use, to understand, to maintain and possibly to further develop.**

## F. The Joint Strategy - conclusions and recommendations for rural areas

The **integration rationale** on which the More than a Village strategy is built upon and that is being implemented via the Action Plans can be described as having a further spatial dimension, that of a **transnational space**. Several issues worthy of interregional (that is, transnational) learning have already emerged in the first year of More than a Village, also beyond the mere fact that all More than a Village's

territory suffer from similar marginality and real or perceived lack of attractiveness, and such instances will represent also the core aspects of the transnational structure of each of the Action Plans.

The following transnational outcomes can be described both as **pillars for the transnational aspects of the More than a Village Joint Strategy**, and as recommendations on how the **interregional learning within More than a Village can support the implementation of each of the Action Plans**:

**1) *Enhancing the capacity, awareness, openness and readiness of the local population with respect to digital innovation***

There is no economy, attractiveness, liveability or sustainable future without the local populations in rural areas. Working with them in order to increase their awareness, capacity, openness and readiness with respect to digital innovation, its opportunities and its ever-changing realities, is fundamental. More than a Village has created the methodological rationale for this, the smartness assessment, and one of the key findings is the need to work closely with rural people to future-proof them with respect to all possible coming digital changes. Digital rural areas are rural areas that become more attractive both for local people and possibly newcomers.

**2) *Embedding integration of policy levels in rural policy decision making***

More than a Village believes that, especially for rural areas, integration is key, so much that it is the cornerstone of the present Joint Strategy. Integration of policy levels should be embedded in all rural decision making processes, even more so than for urban areas, since rural areas often lack the critical mass to influence decision making at higher policy levels. Integration of policy levels is being experimented in the project's pilot areas and of course difficulties are emerging, but integration avoids (at least in theory) redundancies, resistances and delays, and should facilitate swifter and more concrete changes at local levels.

**3) *Including young people in rural decision making***

As trivial as it may sound, there is no future without the younger generations, defined as people below 30 years of age. Including them in a participatory process aiming at co-building decisions for rural areas is also key: young voices often embody a vision that escapes older people, and that is often future-oriented, something that

sometimes rural areas sorely lack. Participatory processes, like the one implemented in More than a Village, can and should openly declare they want to include the younger generations.

**4) *Enhancing and facilitating public-private rural-centred partnerships***

All forces in rural areas must gather and join in, in an integrated approach, to guarantee smart and sustainable development and to counter the circle of decline. In the same integration approach of the Joint Strategy, rural areas must go beyond integration of policy makers and facilitate public-private cooperations and partnerships, in a well set policy and planning context, in order to also underline the business opportunities, for tourism and beyond, that abound in rural areas.

**5) *Allowing experimentation in rural strategies and action plans***

Innovation in policy making for rural areas should be supported by allowing some degree of experimentation within the policies themselves, in order to foresee and encompass possible changes and re-orientations, incorporating resilience and adaptability in the act of policy making, in the spirit already embodied by the EU-supported Smart Specialisation Strategies (S3), as well as in all EU-supported plans and initiatives dedicated to smart-village development. The present Joint Strategy and the Action Plans, which are themselves characterised by an iterative and recursive nature, embody this ‘experimentation’ recommendation.