RURACTIVE

Empowering rural communities for change

RURACTIVE Forum – Launch event

10 February 2025

On 10 February 2025, the RURACTIVE project held its **first RURACTIVE Forum meeting**, bringing together **over 110 participants**, including project partners, external stakeholders, and practitioners from across Europe and beyond.

This online space is designed to **foster knowledge exchange, collaboration, and meaningful discussions** on the future of rural development in Europe. The Forum builds on RURACTIVE's insights, facilitating dialogue among stakeholders, project partners, and policymakers. With the upcoming EU term and the preparation of the post-2027 EU Budget, this is a timely opportunity to assess and **enhance how EU policies can promote smart, inclusive, and sustainable rural development**.

ORGANISER: aeidl

Work Package Leader on Smart and community-led solutions implementation, monitoring and evaluation

📍 **Online**

👥 **113 participants from 33 countries**
EU institutions; national, regional and local public authorities; researchers; Local Action Groups; NGOs

📋 **Agenda, presentations and recording: here**

In this inaugural meeting, participants had the opportunity to learn from the RURACTIVE project and exchange ideas and approaches regarding the future of rural development and innovation.

The meeting opened with a brief introduction by **Serafín Pazos-Vidal** (AEIDL), setting the stage for a dynamic two-and-a-half-hour interactive session. Following this, we had the privilege of hearing from **Arianna Pasa** (DG AGRI), who outlined the new priorities and focus areas for the new Commission mandate.

Claudia De Luca (University of Bologna), coordinator of RURACTIVE, then presented the bigger picture of the project, explaining how it fits into the broader European rural development landscape. Additionally, **Simone Sasso** (JRC) provided an insightful presentation on rural innovation, shedding light on JRC's work in this field. **Janne Sinerma** (AEIDL) shared key lessons learned based on AEIDL's experience with previous Horizon projects in policy domains relevant to RURACTIVE.

Following the initial presentations, participants engaged in **three breakout sessions focused on RURACTIVE Dynamos**. These sessions provided a more granular perspective, with Dynamos representatives showcasing their ongoing work at the local and regional levels across Europe and beyond. The session concluded with a roundtable discussion chaired by Serafín Pazos-Vidal, where representatives from sister projects, **SMART ERA and FUTURAL**, shared their insights and laid the groundwork for future collaboration between the projects.

To wrap up the meeting, **Claudia De Luca** (UNIBO) thanked all participants for their contributions and invited them to join the next RURACTIVE Forum meeting, scheduled for later in 2025.

Opening

Serafin Pazos-Vidal, *Senior Expert, Rural and Territorial Development (AEIDL)*

The session opened with **Serafin Pazos-Vidal** (AEIDL), who highlighted the high attendance and the diverse representation from different sectors, both within and outside the project. He emphasised that the [RURACTIVE Forum](#) serves as an interactive platform for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and innovation in rural development. He also introduced the connections with sister projects FUTURAL and SMARTERA, which aim to enhance rural sustainability. The meeting was structured into two parts: an introductory session, where the participants heard keynote presentations from EU institutions and to present the project's objectives. The second part was set up more interactive way, where participants could share their insights and feedback.

Key discussions focused on the role of pilot projects in rural development, the European Commission's support, and the importance of co-creation in policy and solution implementation. Breakout sessions were also planned to delve into topics like energy, local services, nature, and mobility.

Supporting rural communities

Arianna Pasa *(DG Agriculture and Rural Development, European Commission)*

Arianna Pasa provided an overview of the European Commission's strategic priorities for rural development. She outlined the evolving policy landscape, touching on key initiatives such as the [Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas](#) (launched in 2021) and the [Common Agricultural Policy](#) (CAP), which has been a foundational EU policy since 1962. She highlighted that the current CAP framework (effective from 2023) extends beyond agriculture to encompass broader rural development goals.

Arianna also contextualised the discussion within the EU's shifting priorities, emphasising **food security, climate adaptation, and economic resilience as major policy focal points**. She mentioned that the European Board on Agriculture and Food, established in early 2025, will guide strategic developments in agriculture and rural sustainability. Furthermore, she stressed the **importance of digital tools and innovation in rural policies**, referencing Horizon Europe as a funding mechanism to support smart rural communities.

She noted ongoing concerns, such as rural depopulation, lack of infrastructure, and challenges in generational renewal within the agricultural sector. The European Commission is working towards **mobilising investments in rural economies, improving infrastructure**, and ensuring that rural areas remain viable places to live and work.

Arianna also highlighted **Smart Villages**, a concept supported by Horizon Europe and the Common Agricultural Policy. These villages leverage digital technologies, social innovation, and community-driven solutions to enhance sustainability and quality of life in rural areas. So far, 20 EU Member States have planned Smart Village initiatives, with over 1,000 strategies or projects expected to be developed. Pilot projects have already demonstrated the potential of Smart Villages **in improving access to essential services, economic opportunities, and environmental sustainability**.

RURACTIVE project presentation

Claudia De Luca, *RURACTIVE project coordinator (UNIBO)*

Claudia De Luca introduced the RURACTIVE project, explaining its structure, objectives, and participating partners. The project involves 29 partners, including universities, SMEs, NGOs, municipalities, and regions, with 12 rural communities (Dynamos) at its core.

The primary **objectives** of RURACTIVE include:

- Enhancing the sustainability and resilience of rural areas.

- Promoting digital and green transitions in rural economies.

- Encouraging co-creation and knowledge-sharing among stakeholders.

- Supporting innovative solutions in key rural development sectors.

- Strengthening policy frameworks for rural communities.

The initiative focuses on **six rural development drivers** (RDDs):

- Sustainable agrifood systems and ecosystem management.

- Nature-based and cultural tourism.

- Energy transition and climate neutrality.

- Sustainable multimodal mobility.

- Culture and cultural innovation.

- Local services, health, and well-being.

She also outlined key methodologies, such as stakeholder engagement, training, and policy analysis, emphasising the intersection of rural development with digitalisation and sustainability. Additionally, she explained the **project's funding model and implementation timeline**, and highlighted the importance of the Dynamos, which serve as community-driven hubs where new models of rural innovation are tested, refined, and adapted for broader implementation.

Innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas: the Startup Village Forum initiative

Simone Sasso, *European Commission's Joint Research Centre*

Simone Sasso's presentation provided an overview of the Joint Research Centre's (JRC) work on empowering rural areas through innovation and entrepreneurship, emphasising challenges such as rural-urban gaps, negative demographic trends, and the geography of discontent. Strategic documents like the Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas (LTVRA) and the New Innovation Agenda addressed these challenges, highlighting the Startup Village initiative, coordinated by JRC, as a key measure to boost innovation, entrepreneurship, and competitiveness in rural areas.

The JRC's work on **rural innovation and entrepreneurship** revolves around three main areas. The first involves developing **metrics and indicators** to measure innovation and entrepreneurship in rural areas, where traditional urban-focused indicators are inadequate. This includes conducting a large-scale survey to map rural business innovation across all EU Member States and using both primary and secondary data sources. The second area of focus is **understanding innovation drivers through econometric studies and analyses**. The third key pillar involves **engaging rural communities and stakeholders** by hosting an annual Startup Village Forum in Brussels and running the Startup Village Mapping Initiative, where rural areas can share insights on innovation and business creation.

JRC's analysis of startup activities revealed that **Germany and France hosted the highest number of EU startups**, though the Netherlands outperformed larger countries proportionally. At the NUTS-1 level, the share of rural startups varied widely across countries, with Luxembourg, Denmark, and Austria leading, while the EU average stood at 6%. At the NUTS-3 level, the distribution differed substantially. JRC also developed an index showing that rural citizens accounted for 25% of startups in their countries, with significant variation across and within countries.

The JRC is actively working on several studies to support rural innovation. These include a large-scale EU-wide survey to compare innovation in rural versus urban firms, developing rural-specific indicators for measuring innovation, analysing venture capital flows and their impact on rural startups, examining the role of **crowdfunding** in rural business financing, and using online job advertisements to map regional skill portfolios. Results from these studies will be published in 2025.

There are various opportunities for engagement in these initiatives. **The Startup Village Forum will take place in Brussels in the fall**, offering a platform for collaboration among researchers, policymakers, and rural stakeholders. More than 150 rural territories have already joined the Startup Village Mapping Initiative, and others are encouraged to participate. The JRC will continue to release new data and insights throughout 2025, providing stakeholders with valuable information to support rural innovation and entrepreneurship.

The European Commission, through the JRC, is committed to supporting rural innovation by providing data, fostering entrepreneurship, and engaging rural communities. The Startup Village Forum and Mapping Initiative offer valuable platforms for collaboration. With ongoing research and upcoming publications, stakeholders are encouraged to stay involved in shaping Europe's rural innovation landscape.

Lessons learned from past Horizon projects

Janne Sinerma, *Project Manager of RURACTIVE (AEIDL)*

Janne Sinerma provided in his presentation AEIDL's recent work on lesson's learned from past Horizon projects by **analysing the policy outcomes** from the project's and providing a synthesis of the **policy recommendations** in regards of RURACTIVE project's six (6) Rural Development Drivers (RDD) or policy domains.

Breakout Sessions

Three breakout sessions were conducted, each covering different aspects of rural development:

Energy transition and local services, health and wellbeing

The breakout room discussion focused on the **Dynamo project, an initiative operating in Finland**, Northern Ostrobothnia's Iijoki river basin. The project faces common **rural challenges**, including outmigration, an aging population, and limited services, exacerbated by long distances between villages. Additionally, **external pressures related to energy infrastructure and peatland restoration** have created local conflicts, as the definition of restoration remains unclear.

The key research and development areas (RDDs) of the project include energy transition, nature-based and cultural tourism, and health and well-being. Several solutions have already been implemented, such as the Iijoki River Agreement, a governance model coordinating restoration efforts, a carbon exchange company focused on land restoration for carbon sequestration, reindeer farms used for local workshops, and constructed wetlands. The Livo School Village House also serves as a community hub.

The **five major challenges** identified include:

- Eco-social compensation for communities affected by large-scale energy projects.
- Sustainable community services, particularly addressing the lack of subsidies for essential services like janitorial work.
- Local product development and branding, improving market opportunities for rural products.
- Integrated services and transportation, exploring new logistics models.
- Decentralised energy networks, promoting small-scale, community-based energy solutions.

Discussions were categorised into three main themes. The first addressed the **balance between local expectations and broader sustainability goals**, emphasising that administrative policies differ across regions, influencing the feasibility of innovation. The second focused on **employment and entrepreneurship**, particularly the lack of young people in rural development initiatives. Most villages rely on retired volunteers, raising concerns about future leadership. Additionally, rural job structures often do not align with urban employment models, complicating entrepreneurship and business development. The third theme centred on **energy compensation**, highlighting that municipalities often accept energy projects in exchange for revenue, yet compensation for local communities remains insufficient, sometimes in the form of ineffective initiatives.

The primary funding sources for the Dynamo project come from the EU's LEADER initiative and the Rural Development Fund, managed by regional authorities. While additional national funding exists, LEADER remains the primary financial mechanism supporting rural innovation.

Nature-based tourism and cultural innovation

The discussion focused on the Dynamo in Greece, an initiative led by Ecomuseum Zagori, which aims to **preserve and manage biodiversity** in the mountainous areas of Greece. What makes this eco-museum unique is that it is entirely community-led, having emerged as a local initiative.

As highlighted, the project is more than just a museum; it functions as a local development hub, contributing to the regeneration of the area, attracting tourism, and fostering societal interaction at the local level. The discussion emphasised the **need for integrated solutions that involve multiple public groups**, including both residents and visitors. The initiative strongly prioritises **social inclusion**, working to bring together marginalised and vulnerable groups through innovative approaches.

The discussion also underscored the importance of **digital tools in addressing key challenges**. Several areas were identified where European-level support could provide added value. Networking was seen as a crucial factor, as exchanging knowledge between similar initiatives can help strengthen local projects. Another challenge was the **promotion of year-round tourism**, particularly in mountain regions, where climate change is creating new adaptation needs. Additionally, ensuring **sustainable funding** remains a significant concern for the initiative's long-term viability and expansion.

Multimodal mobility and agrifood and ecosystem management

The discussion in this breakout room focused on multimodal mobility and ecosystem management, with particular emphasis on the [Carpathian region of Ukraine, Zakarpattya](#). The Ukrainian partner, Forza, highlighted challenges and opportunities in the region, which, despite not being part of the EU, **shares many developmental concerns with other rural areas in Western Europe**. The Carpathian region was described as remote yet rich in potential, particularly for tourism and entrepreneurship. However, significant **gaps exist in business development, infrastructure, and data availability**, which hinder sustainable growth. The Dynamo project in the region has identified **over 40 challenges**, but the discussion focused on three key areas.

One of the such concerns was **honey production**, an industry with strong potential in the region but facing difficulties in scaling up, improving quality, and gathering accurate production data. The absence of structured data on honey production prevents sustainability assessments and limits industry growth. Another major issue was the **lack of reliable data for rural services and tourism**, which remains a significant obstacle not only in Ukraine but also in parts of Western Europe. Inaccurate or missing information makes it difficult to plan and develop sustainable tourism initiatives.

Infrastructure and mobility challenges were also widely discussed, particularly the poor road infrastructure that poses safety risks and impedes economic development. The absence of proper lighting, sidewalks, and dedicated cycling lanes creates unsafe conditions for both pedestrians and cyclists. Without proper mapping of cycling routes, it becomes difficult to plan and develop necessary infrastructure improvements.

One of the key solutions discussed was a project supported by Nordic grants and EU funding, which led to the development of a cycling route map. Though seemingly a minor initiative, this mapping effort has become the foundation for technical guidance on cycling infrastructure development. The discussion emphasised that small, cost-effective steps, often requiring more human capital than financial investment, can lay the groundwork for long-term infrastructure improvements. The session concluded with reflections on how **rural infrastructure development often depends on small-scale but crucial interventions** that can serve as stepping stones for broader investments.

Roundtable and Plenary

Moderated by Serafin Pazos-Vidal *(AEIDL)*

Figure 1. Some of the participants and speakers from the launching event

The roundtable consisted of the sister projects of RURACTIVE – **SMART ERA and FUTURAL**. The reaction by SMART ERA coordinator **Matteo Gerosa** (Fondazione Bruno Kessler) highlighted that SMART ERA project extended well beyond agriculture, raising the question of whether future rural development initiatives would maintain a holistic, wider-than-agriculture approach. Matteo Gerosa acknowledged its approach differed from RURACTIVE but expressed interest in learning from its experience.

Carlo Giua (University of Pisa), from FUTURAL project, particularly welcomed the concept of Rural Innovation Ecosystems in RURACTIVE, suggesting it should be further explored and conceptualised to better address the diverse needs of rural areas and foster sustainable innovation.