

“Smartes Land”: Promotion of interdisciplinary innovation approaches in rural areas in the European Union and beyond

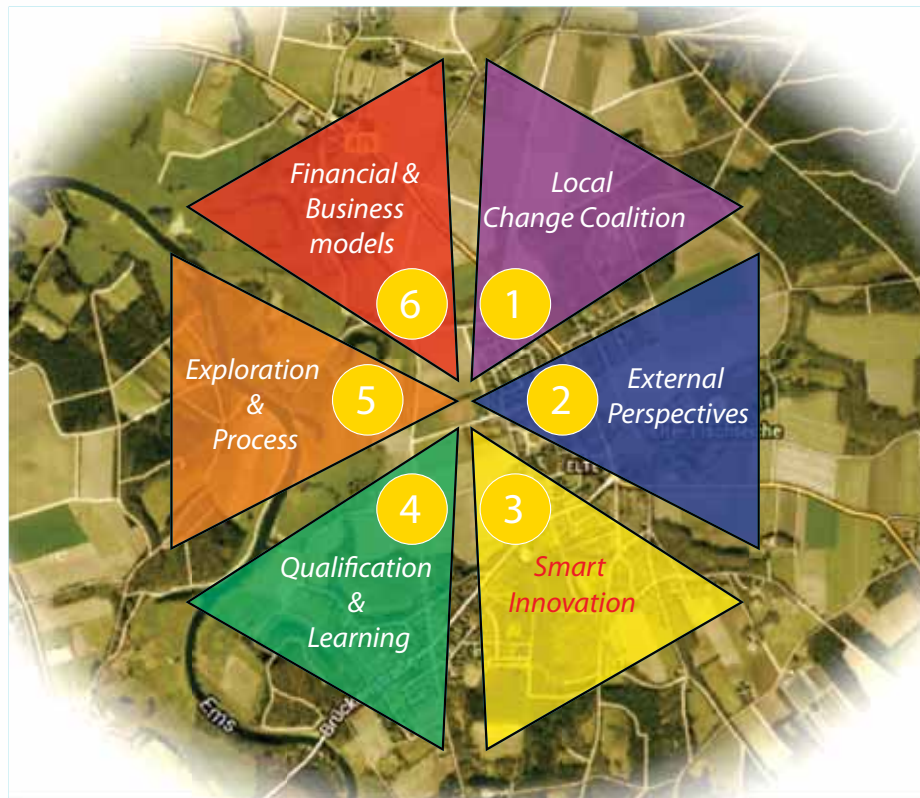
‘Smartes Land’ is the heading under which Mesopartner started to reflect on how to promote innovation orientation in rural areas in the European Union (EU) through multidisciplinary innovation promotion approaches. The term ‘Smartes Land’, which is a combination of English and German terms, can be translated as ‘smart rural area’, a topic which is gaining increasing importance

in European regions and in many developing countries. Inspired by the smart city approach, it promotes innovation in rural areas, links rural areas with cities and encourages rural locations to learn from urban approaches. Beyond digitisation, it interprets ‘smart solutions’ as a collection of systemic interventions that increase quality of life and the attractiveness of territories.

In the EU, innovation promotion in rural towns and regions is gaining relevance for economic, political and social reasons. Many rural areas need to modernise SMEs, promote start-ups, increase the qualifications of its people, create employment opportunities especially for the youth, and attract more qualified people. In this respect, 'Smarter Land' could help to overcome the widening development gap between rural and urban areas, in both developed and developing countries.

To explain the essence of local economic development (LED), in Mesopartner we use the LED Hexagon, which is a figure consisting of six triangles, each of them visualising a key intervention area in LED. Based on the LED Hexagon, we also use this logic as the basis for developing the six triangles of the 'Smarter Land' framework. The resulting hexagon proposes six different entry points for smart rural development, with each triangle emphasising three highly related and synergetic key aspects (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: The six triangles of the 'Smarter Land' Hexagon



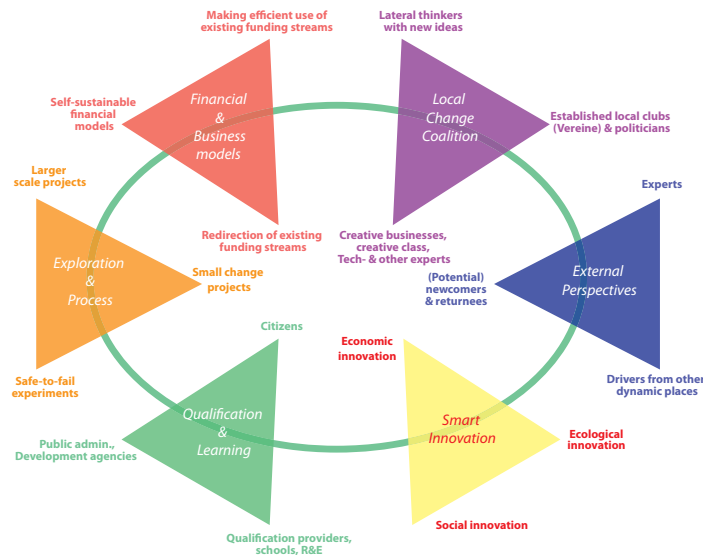
Triangle 1: Creating a local change coalition

Innovation means both promoting new ways of doing things and doing new things. Innovation cannot only be instigated or incentivised from the outside. Differently minded creative people from within the location need to initiate innovation. Bringing these people together requires network facilitation, as they do not necessarily find each other on their own. People interested in bottom-up initiatives can be found within established structures such as local clubs (German: Vereine) or groups of local politicians. Additional important groups are innovative entrepreneurs, freelancers and tech-savvy, committed, creative young people. Finally, lateral thinkers who are critical of established structures bring important new impulses and perspectives into the discussion. Shaping a coalition of these groups of actors would be the starting point of highly relevant innovation initiatives.

Triangle 2: Integrating external perspectives

Many innovative instruments that work in urban settings might also work in rural territories. Examples are co-working spaces, car sharing and other new mobility models, start-up promotion concepts, idea camps or hackathons, innovation labs, etc. Applying these ideas in rural settings may require some modification as well as the receptiveness of local stakeholders to different perspectives and experiences from the outside. The three types of individuals who can bring external perspectives and fresh ideas into an innovation process are 1) experts with specific knowledge, 2) potential newcomers to rural areas and returnees, and 3) dynamic stakeholders from other rural or urban areas interested in sharing experiences and knowledge.

Figure 9: The different corners of the triangles in each hexagon





Triangle 3: Linking economic, social and environmental innovations

The reflection on the opportunities of digitalisation has reached rural areas. In Germany, applied research organisations such as the Fraunhofer Society and many rural administrations have started reflecting on how to make use of digital solutions and platforms for supporting development in villages and small towns. These reflections use different entry points, but are largely centred around economic, social and environmental innovations. Examples include economic innovations such as Industry 4.0 activities with SMEs and new digital start-up business models; ecological innovations such as e-mobility for cars and bicycles, renewable energy systems, sustainable circular economy approaches, and organic food supply platforms; and social innovations such as communication and assistance platforms, telemedicine and flexible health services, rural car-sharing and mobility services. New cooperative and social entrepreneurship models also illustrate novel forms of social innovation. Reflection on these kinds of ideas in an interdisciplinary way enables the identification of innovative projects and the creation of knowledge-sharing networks.





Triangle 4: Qualification and learning for change

Qualification plays an important role in times of change, both in existing public and private organisations and among citizens. Many studies have identified educational gaps between rural and urban areas. Improving education and qualification in rural areas will be an important driver for future development. This requires the modernisation of traditional schools and higher education institutions in the countryside as well as more participatory processes in established organisational structures such as local clubs and meso organisations such as local public administration and economic and social support agencies. They need to start embracing life-long learning approaches, more modern apprenticeship programmes and innovation-oriented qualifications. In the future, these organisations will need to encourage creativity, lateral thinking and other new learning elements. Another



entry point is to offer more qualification opportunities for citizens through rural academies, online qualification and experiential, interdisciplinary learning initiatives.

Triangle 5: Exploration and process orientation for innovation initiatives

Based on our experience, it is essential to start innovation initiatives with quickly implementable short-term activities that lead to a change of mindset, making it possible to tap into social, ecological and economic development opportunities. These initiatives are likely to work and create trust and motivation among the actors involved – and might motivate other actors to become engaged. In situations of uncertainty, ‘safe-to-fail’ experiments can be used to explore available options. Safe-to-fail in this context means to explore new possibilities on a small scale and to see what patterns emerge. If the patterns are seen as positive, they can be amplified. Otherwise they should be brought to a conclusion. Safe-

to-fail experiments and small change initiatives can lead to larger-scale projects once the situation is well understood and stable. The larger-scale projects will then require management competences and structures.

Triangle 6: Identification of new financing models

It is essential to develop new financing models for the promotion of smart rural projects. This includes, first, possible redirection of existing funding streams offered by local and regional public administrations, second, making more intensive use of national and EU funding schemes, and third, searching for self-sustainable financing models. The latter could be driven by local public-private partnerships by cooperative models in which citizens contribute to investments. Private investments or self-supporting financial solutions such as app user fees, car-sharing cost models and crowdfunding are some examples.

In addition to developing the ‘Smarter Land’ Hexagon, Mesopartner has started to publish blog posts and articles, conduct short surveys and organise workshops with different players and municipalities in Germany. The ‘Smarter Land’ approach is still in its infancy and we are exploring various ways in which it can evolve. We are therefore interested in extending our learning network and promoting this topic internationally. Please contact us if you are interested in further exchange. To this end we have set up the platform <http://smarter.land> to share our experiences and engage with others.

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